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Imagining the Death of Jesus in Fourth-Century Mesopotamia

A Study of Ephrem of Nisibis

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BLAKE HARTUNG

Imagining the Death of Jesus in Fourth-Century Mesopotamia

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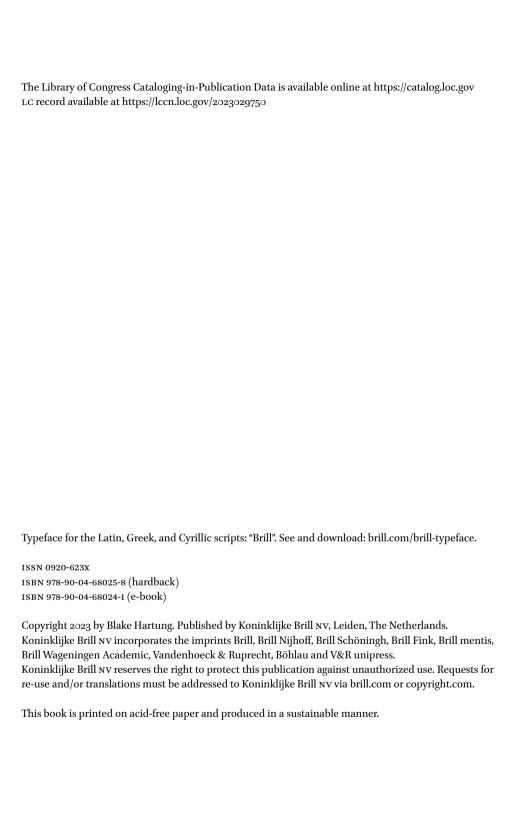# Imagining the Death of Jesus in Fourth-Century Mesopotamia

A Study of Ephrem of Nisibis

By

Blake Hartung

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Preface

This book represents a major revision of my dissertation, which was written at Saint Louis University under the direction of Dr. Jeffrey Wickes (now at the University of Notre Dame), and successfully defended in January 2017. Dr. Daniel Smith and Dr. Peter Martens were also valued members of my dissertation committee. With the guidance of my committee, I was able to emerge from the dissertation process as a more confident academic writer and researcher, for which I am very grateful.

The revisions in question are quite extensive, and represent, in my view, significant improvements upon the original dissertation. This book is the fruit of a long process of continued intellectual growth in the years following my Ph.D. graduation. Much has happened in my life since that time, including the publication of several articles and essays, a move to Arizona to begin an academic position at Arizona State University, the birth of my first child, and the experience of a global pandemic.

Throughout all of this, Dr. Wickes has become a valued colleague, and I am thankful to him for his generosity in reviewing several drafts of chapters throughout the process of revision. I received early feedback on the new direction for this project from the many members of the Christianity in Antiquity Workshop in St. Louis, MO in March 2018. Later, I was fortunate to have the assistance of Dr. Philip Forness, who read and commented on several chapters.

Chapter 6 is a new addition to this study (not included in the original dissertation). This chapter is a significant expansion of a conference paper I presented at the North American Syriac Symposium in 2015 (now published in a conference proceedings volume by the Catholic University of America Press). Dr. Aaron Butts and Dr. Trevor Lipscombe read and commented on a pre-publication copy of that essay. Any elements of that work which are reproduced here appear with the permission of the publisher.

Throughout the process of writing this book, my wife Sarah has been my greatest source of support and encouragement. We met in the first year of my Ph.D. program, and her love of poetry helped to confirm my interest in writing about Ephrem. To her, I dedicate this work.

Abbreviations

Ephrem's Madrāšē Cycles

Abr. Qid.	*de Abraham Qidunaya*
Arm.	*Armenian Hymns*
Azym.	*de Azymis* (*On the Unleavened Bread*)
CH	*contra Haereses* (*Against Heresies*)
Cruc.	*de Crucifixione* (*On the Crucifixion*)
Eccl.	*de Ecclesia* (*On the Church*)
Fid.	*de Fide* (*On Faith*)
Ieiun.	*de Ieiunio* (*On the Fast*)
Jul.	*contra Julianum* (*Against Julian*)
Nat.	*de Nativitate* (*On the Nativity*)
Nis.	*Carmina Nisibena* (*On Nisibis*)
Par.	*de Paradiso* (*On Paradise*)
Res.	*de Resurrectione* (*On the Resurrection*)
Virg.	*de Virginitate* (*On Virginity*)

Other Works Attributed to Ephrem

Bard.	*Mêmrâ against Bardaisan*
Comm. Diat.	*Commentary on the Diatessaron*
Comm. Ex	*Commentary on Exodus*
Comm. Gen.	*Commentary on Genesis*
Dom.	*Discourse Against Bardaisan's "Domnus"*
Hyp.	*Discourses to Hypatius*
Marc.	*Discourses against Marcion*
Nic.	*Mêmrê on Nicomedia*
PR	*Prose Refutations*
Pub.	*Letter to Publius*
Repr.	*Mêmrê on Reproof*

Other Primary Sources

Dem.	Aphrahat, *Demonstrations*
Euch.	Cyrillona, *Mēmrê on the Institution of the Eucharist*

OS	Old Syriac Gospels
P	Peshitta
C	Curetonian Gospels (BL Add. Ms. 14,451)
S	Sinaiticus Syriac Gospels (Ms. Sinai Syr. 30)

Journals and Serials

CSCO	*Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*
FaCh	*Fathers of the Church*
JECS	*Journal of Early Christian Studies*
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
LCL	*Loeb Classical Library*
OrChr	*Oriens Christianus*
OCA	*Orientalia Christiana Analecta*
OCP	*Orientalia Christiana Periodica*
PG	*Patrologia Greca*
PO	*Patrologia Orientalis*
SC	*Sources Chrétiennes*
VC	*Vigiliae Christianae*
ZAC	*Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum*

Abbreviations of biblical and other ancient texts follow the standard abbreviations found in the *SBL Handbook of Style*, section 8.3.

Introduction: Imagining the Death of Jesus in Fourth-Century Mesopotamia

1   Introduction

> [*Res.* 3.10] In April, the thick cloak, darkness, is torn apart completely.
> Lightning bolts strike in the darkness, their flashes splitting it.
> [In] the feast that took place in April, tombs split open through a voice.
> Death, killer of all, heard the voice that is the life-giver of all,
> and yielded up its treasures. Glory to you, Son of the life-giver of all![1]

Sometime in the mid-fourth century CE, in the Roman border province of Mesopotamia, Ephrem of Nisibis (ca. 307–373) composed this stanza to accompany the celebration of the Easter festival. Ephrem was one of the first and most renowned Christian poets and theologians in the Syriac language, famed in his own tradition as "the Harp of the Holy Spirit," and known throughout much of the later Christian world simply as "the Syrian."[2]

In this poem, Ephrem reveals his place within longstanding trajectories in early Christian theological discourse. The suffering and death of Jesus were ubiquitous themes in early Christian literature, the source of intense theological reflection (beginning at least as early as the epistles of Paul). For Ephrem, as for other early Christians, these events formed the central drama of the Christian story. One of the common motifs of this drama—the presentation of Jesus' death as a victory over death—appears in the excerpt cited above.

Early Christians wrote in a variety of literary genres, for diverse audiences. Most early Christian writers did not set out to produce systematic statements on theological topics, and when they did so, it was typically in response to particular controversies or local questions. This non-systematic approach is

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1   ܐܠܗܐ ܚܒܟܐ ܣܘܕܟܐ ܚܠܗ ܚܠܝܡ ܚܡܛܗܪܘ | ܗܬܝܣ ܚܬܟܐ ܚܣܘܕܟܐ ܚܘܘܛܡ ܠܗ ܐܠܬܡܣܠܐ | ܚܐܚܐ ܐܘܘܘܡ ܚܘܡܐ ܚܠܝܡ ܚܬܟܐ ܨܝ، ،ܘܘܕܘܐܘܬ ܐܠܟ | ܐܘܡ | ، ܟܣܟ ܚܠ ܣܐܚܟܚܘ ܚܠ ܨܘܠܐ ܪܗܚܐ | ܘܐܝܪܐܬܪܐ ܣܘܬܘܡ ܠܝܐ، ،ܘܘܗܝܐ ܚܙ܆ܚܣܪܐ ܠܝܐ ܣܐܚܣܐ ܨ ܚܣܪܐ ܚܠ (ed. Beck, *Pascha-hymnen*, 87).

2   For the legacy of Ephrem in the Syriac tradition, see Sebastian P. Brock, "St. Ephrem in the Eyes of Later Syriac Liturgical Tradition," *Hugoye* 2, no. 1 (1999): 5–25; Andrew Palmer, "The Influence of Ephrem the Syrian," *Hugoye* 2, no. 1 (1999): 83–109.

particularly obvious with an issue like the death of Jesus, which was affirmed by all, yet was never a topic that occasioned treatises or creedal precision. Still, modern theologians and historians have tended to approach the subject in pursuit of coherent early Christian "doctrines" to reconstruct, searching for "the patristic model of atonement" or the "classic view" of atonement.[3] Such studies assume a specific, later understanding of "atonement," or divine–human reconciliation, that does not account for the full range of significance that early Christian sources applied to the death of Jesus. This scholarly trajectory has likewise tended to blur distinctions between ancient writers, as if there were a single "patristic doctrine." Just as problematically, it results in a kind of *florilegium* style, extracting excerpts from the literary contexts in which they were originally embedded. It is worth considering instead how individual early Christian writers drew upon particular theological affirmations and adapted them to speak to distinct issues, with different audiences, and through various sorts of texts (e.g., hymns, homilies, and commentaries). In all of these respects, Ephrem provides an especially valuable case study.

Ephrem wrote in both prose and poetry, for liturgical and para-liturgical audiences as well as for scholastic literary circles (and indeed, many of his poems seem to have blurred the lines between those categories).[4] His poetic writings in particular—which comprise the majority of his extant works— attest to the way in which the event of the death of Jesus (as told in the gospel Passion narratives) served as fruitful soil for his literary imagination. Throughout the poem cited above, Ephrem draws upon a Hellenistic "canon" of stock images and motifs for spring, reflected also in Greek Christian writers of the fourth century, and seen in this excerpt in his evocation of vernal thunderstorms.[5] He also repeatedly employs the verbal root *ṣrâ* (found in the Syriac versions of Matt 27:51 to describe the "tearing" of the Temple veil and the "split-

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3   For the "patristic model of the atonement," see Darby Kathleen Ray, *Deceiving the Devil: Atonement, Abuse, and Ransom* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1998), 125. For the "classic idea," see Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A.G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1969). I will engage with this work and other modern studies in more detail below.

4   For the best examination of these questions of the performance and audience of Ephrem's works, see Jeffrey Wickes, "Between Liturgy and School: Reassessing the Performative Context of Ephrem's *Madrāšê*," *JECS* 26, no. 1 (2018): 25–51.

5   For this discovery, see Gerard Rouwhorst, "L'évocation du mois de Nisan dans les Hymnes sur la Résurrection d'Éphrem de Nisibe," in *IV Symposium Syriacum, 1984: Literary Genres in Syriac Literature* (*Groningen—Oosterhesselen 10–12 September*). Ed. H.J.W. Drijvers, René Lavenant, Corrie Molenberg, and Gerrit J. Reinink, OCA 229 (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1987), 101–110.

ting" of rocks in the earthquake following Jesus' death).[6] In Ephrem's hands, the natural world, in which lightning "splits" (*mṣarrên*) the darkness, becomes a mirror of the crucifixion, when the tombs "split open" (*ṣarrî*) and the dead were raised (Matt 27:51–52).[7] Further, by using this particular participial form of the verb (*mṣarrên*), which sounds like the Syriac word "Egypt" (*mēṣrên*), Ephrem anticipates the following stanza, and the parallels it draws between the Passion of Jesus and the Exodus narrative. Through subtle repetition of biblical language, Ephrem makes nature and scripture speak with one voice. This recurring use of the active verb *ṣarrî* (which also appears in preceding stanzas not cited here) lends the poem a sense of urgency, and even violence. In the broader context of this poem, which Ephrem probably composed for a liturgical audience to commemorate the festival of Pascha, the crucifixion of Jesus becomes the dramatic birth of a community, the origins of which were written in the very book of nature itself.

2   The Subject of This Study

This book analyzes Ephrem's portrayal of the death of Jesus. As a writer deeply rooted in Syriac biblical traditions, Ephrem creatively appropriated well-established Christian concepts and images, and drew them together as he reflected on the manifold significance of the death of Jesus in various contexts. Therefore, this book serves two primary functions: first, it provides a case study of an aspect of the theological and literary activity of the most renowned writer in the early Syriac Christian tradition; and second, it offers new perspectives into early Christian reflection on the death of Jesus (what scholars have traditionally—but somewhat misleadingly—called the "patristic doctrine of atonement").

The central question of this book is a straightforward one: what, according to Ephrem, did the suffering and death of Jesus mean? To answer that question, I analyze Ephrem's portrayal of the Passion and death of Jesus in light of the issues of literary genre, performance, and aesthetics. I argue that the genre of Ephrem's writings (usually short in length, often written in meter), their public function and occasional nature, and their elevated poetic language and complex imagery render Ephrem's ideas resistant to systematization. Ephrem did not have a "theology of the death of Jesus"; he had a wide-ranging theological

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6   The verb appears in both the Old Syriac (OS) and Peshitta (P) versions.
7   For more on Ephrem's use of this central passage, see the following chapter.

imagination that drew on biblical and traditional motifs related to Jesus' death and continuously re-portrayed them in different contexts. For Ephrem, Jesus' death was the moment of his dramatic descent to Sheol, the realm of the dead; it provided a stark warning against the dangers of excessive theological inquiry; it offered a pattern for and prefiguration of the Christian liturgical celebration of Easter; and it revealed the annulment of the old covenant with the Jewish people and the inauguration of the new covenant with the Gentiles.[8] Throughout his writings, Ephrem gravitated toward particular narrative moments in the Passion accounts, like the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and the raising of the dead at Jesus' death, moments which he retells, reimagines, and alludes to with great frequency.

This book therefore argues that for Ephrem, the implications of Jesus' death were more expansive than traditional scholarly categories like "atonement theology" would allow. I use the phrase theological imagination for this reason—to account both for the polyvalence of Ephrem's thought and for my own focus on Ephrem's creative work of presenting ideas and imagery to audiences.[9] Ephrem's treatment of the Passion and death of Jesus was fundamentally dramatic, performed in hymnic repetitions of paradoxes, evocative retellings of biblical narratives, and imaginatively constructed speeches in character. This dramatic quality was shaped by the primary literary media in which he wrote— relatively short, publicly performed texts, written in poetic meters (*mêmrê* or *madrāšê*).

For this reason, performative and rhetorical analysis is critical to the study of Ephrem's works. As I have already shown with the Easter poem cited above, analysis of Ephrem's poetic artistry adds essential insights which might not be apparent in a more surface-level reading. More broadly, then, this book argues that in uncovering any early Christian theology, we have to think deeply about the relationship between literary genre, performative occasion, and aesthetics. This study therefore represents an extended analysis of Ephrem in

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8   For Ephrem, the rejection of the Jewish "people" in favor of the Gentile "peoples" was a central point of polemic. The preponderance of anti-Jewish themes in many of Ephrem's writings may point to a degree of proximity or overlap between the two communities in Nisibis and Edessa during his lifetime. These are, however, difficult historical questions, and I explore them in detail in a future chapter.

9   "Imagination" as an organizing concept in philosophy, theology, and religious studies first developed in the 1970s and 80s. A few representative and influential works include: Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (London: Faber, 1976); Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1978); Gordon Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981); Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989).

light of these three focal points—which together comprise the seedbed for
Ephrem's theological imagination.

3   Why Ephrem?

3.1   *Ephrem's Life and Works*

Ephrem is a uniquely well-suited subject for this study. He left behind a vast
corpus of writings that was widely disseminated and emulated across the East-
ern Christian world, and his renown spread rapidly among Greek- and Latin-
speaking Christians.[10] Although we know very little about his life, which is hid-
den behind layers of later hagiographical revision and embellishment, Ephrem
lived and wrote in the pivotal period of the mid-fourth century, albeit far from
the centers of imperial influence and theological controversy.[11] He spent most
of his life in the Roman border town of Nisibis (modern Nusaybin, Turkey).
In 363, after years of intermittent warfare between the Roman and Persian
empires, the new Emperor Jovian surrendered Nisibis to the Persians. Ephrem
made his way to the city of Edessa (modern Şanlıurfa, Turkey), over 150 kilo-
meters to the west, where he became a leader in its the pro-Nicene Christian
community.[12]

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[10]   A mention of Ephrem appears in Epiphanius' *Panarion* (51.22), written ca. 377. Less than
        twenty years after Ephrem's death, Jerome included him in his collection of short biogra-
        phies of notable figures from Christian history. See Jerome, *De Viris Illustribus* 115.

[11]   For a thorough summary of the extant evidence and the numerous remaining questions
        regarding Ephrem's home city of Nisibis, see Paul S. Russell, "Nisibis as the Background
        to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," *Hugoye* 8 (2005): 179–235. With respect to the histori-
        cal details of the life of Ephrem, scholars reject the Syriac *Life of Ephrem* and *Testament
        of Ephrem* as later compositions conveying little accurate data regarding Ephrem's life.
        For this problem, see *The Syriac* Vita *Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian*, ed. and trans. Joseph
        P. Amar, CSCO 629/630 (Louvain: Peeters, 2011); idem, "Byzantine Ascetic Monachism and
        Greek Bias in the *Vita* Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian," *OCP* 58 (1992): 123–156; Bernard
        Outtier, "Saint Éphrem d'après ses biographies et ses œuvres," *Parole de l'Orient* 4:1–2 (1973):
        11–33, 12–15.

[12]   For a standard interpretation of the evidence regarding the pro-Nicene community in
        Edessa and Ephrem's place within it, see Lange, *The Portrayal of Christ in the Syriac Com-
        mentary on the Diatessaron* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 24–27. For an extended examination
        of the fourth-century theological controversies in Edessa, and especially of Ephrem's role
        in those controversies, see Emmanuel Fiano, "The Trinitarian Controversies in Fourth-
        Century Edessa," *Le Muséon* 128, no. 1 (2015): 85–125; 96–100. For a more critical reading
        of the sources on these controversies, see Jeffrey Wickes, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on
        Faith* (FaCh 130; Washington, D.C., 2015), 27.

Ephrem composed a wide variety of texts, including over four hundred metrical *madrāšê* (often translated as "hymns"), two dozen *mêmrê* ("discourses" or "homilies"), as well as a few prose works, notably biblical commentaries on Genesis, Exodus, and possibly, the Diatessaron Gospel. Unfortunately for the historian, Ephrem's writings very rarely make direct references to particular places and events that could be used as a benchmark to date them, and as a result, any attempt to place his works in chronological order (and even to divide them between the earlier "Nisibene" and later "Edessan" periods of Ephrem's career) rests upon very thin evidence, as I have argued elsewhere. The composite nature of Ephrem's *madrāšê* collections and the lack of evidence regarding these two cities (especially Nisibis) can lead to speculative and circular reconstructions.[13] A better approach, it seems to me, is to acknowledge the limitations of dating these works and not build critical arguments about the development of Ephrem's thought on such a foundation.[14] In this study, therefore, I will generally avoid making claims about the dates of Ephrem's writings and the development of his thought. I will seek to read Ephrem's writings first and foremost as "texts" before reading them as "sources," as Averil Cameron has encouraged.[15]

A study of Ephrem offers many distinct advantages. As one of the earliest extant named Christian writers in the Syriac language, Ephrem offers a window into the state of Christianity in fourth-century Mesopotamia, and (however dimly) even further back, to the earlier traditions of Syriac Christianity upon which he drew. His vast corpus of poetry and prose works provides an extensive and diverse body of material for examination, shedding light on otherwise little-known practices of literary composition and performance in Syriac in the fourth century.

3.2   *The Challenges of Studying Ephrem*

Nevertheless, the works of Ephrem present numerous hazards for the scholar: the general lack of specific historical references makes them extremely difficult to date; their style is often vague and allusive, giving only hints of the circum-

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13   The most detailed implementation of this periodization appears in Christian Lange's study of the *Commentary on the Diatessaron.* See Lange, *The Portrayal of Christ*, 29–33.

14   See Blake Hartung, "The Authorship and Dating of the Syriac Corpus Attributed to Ephrem of Nisibis: A Reassessment," *ZAC* 22, no. 2 (2018): 296–321, especially 311–316.

15   Averil Cameron, "Eusebius' *Vita Constantini* and the Construction of Constantine," in *Portraits: Biographical Representations in the Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire*, ed. M.J. Edwards and Simon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 145.

stances they are supposed to address; the texts are unsystematic and defy any attempt at systematization. Throughout the process of researching and writing this book, these challenges bedeviled me at every turn.

As a point of comparison, we can imagine a hypothetical traditional "patristics" study focused on one early Christian theologian's doctrine of the atonement. Such a monograph might focus on several relevant ancient treatises from this writer, drawing supporting evidence from some sermons or letters. Certain references to events within these texts might allow for the creation of a chronological schema by which to organize these materials and trace the development of ideas over the writer's career. Where the texts refute opposing viewpoints and engage in discussions of ongoing controversies, these details could further inform contextualization of the ancient writer's theology.

The challenges facing scholarship on Ephrem create complications for every aspect of this hypothetical project. Every writer and thinker evolves over time, but imposing a chronology on Ephrem's works is deeply problematic. The opacity with which Ephrem usually wrote can further obscure the details of his historical setting. His typical style was either to not mention contemporary events, or to speak of them in an allusive or biblically-charged style of language that made the details difficult to discern. How, then, can we trace the development of his thought? Ephrem did not write many treatises; the vast majority of his compositions were poems, which, by their nature do not typically explore topics in a systematic fashion (individually, or within the larger poetic cycles in which they have been transmitted). These problems are compounded by the general lack of Syriac Christian sources prior to the early fourth century. How is historical analysis possible for ancient texts that cannot easily be contextualized?

This book attempts to meet that challenge by responding to more recent methodological shifts in the study of early Christianity. The traditional patristics model I described above has been the subject of critique. When I first began to research this project, I had the traditional model in mind, imagining a study on Ephrem's theology of the atonement. Over the course of research and writing, I came to see the flaws in such an approach, not only specifically with Ephrem (in light of the particular methodological difficulties mentioned above), but also more broadly. At its worst, in the traditional paradigm of patristic studies, early Christian writers can become nothing more than theological talking heads, with their ideas divorced from social history, material culture, and the broader world of late antiquity. This is not to say that intellectual history or historical theology are irredeemably flawed, but such approaches can, of course, have their weaknesses. Histories of dogma/doctrine, in particular, can represent the old approach at its most problematic, often engaging with

a wide array of source material in short excerpts, without sufficient attention to the literary form and function of the texts from which these excerpts were extracted.

The ongoing "cultural turn" within what is now often called "Early Christian Studies" represents an attempt to challenge the weaknesses of the prior paradigm and to apply new lenses to the study of Christianity in antiquity.[16] The most significant of the insights of this "turn" for the purposes of this study is the post-structuralist critique that we cannot access the past unmediated.[17] We always approach ancient texts through the literary constructions of ancient writers. With Ephrem, as I have noted, this reality is quite evident. Even when Ephrem speaks in the first person, as he often does in introductory and concluding stanzas of his *madrāšê*, his poetic "I" is carefully constructed to model a certain kind of piety.[18] I have thus sought to approach Ephrem's portrayal of the suffering and death of Jesus through extensive engagement with issues of literary genre, performance, and aesthetics.

3.3   *Drama, Performance, and Ephrem's Theological Imagination*
Ephrem imagined the Passion and death of Jesus in dramatic terms, shaped by the literary, metrical, and rhetorical features of the publicly performed texts that comprise most of his extant works. Ephrem's metrical *mêmrê* (translated here as "homilies") and *madrāšê* (translated here as "hymns" or "poems") presuppose public, oral presentation, and were written to fit the rhythmic constraints of meter and stylistic conventions of poetry.[19] Although we cannot

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16   See the summary of Elizabeth A. Clark, "From Patristics to Early Christian Studies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); see also the essays in Dale B. Martin and Patricia Cox Miller, eds., *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies*.

17   See Clark, "From Patristics to Early Christian Studies," 25–26.

18   Wickes, *Bible and Poetry*, 63–64; Derek Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects: Christian Ritual, Biblical Narrative, and the Formation of the Self in Byzantium* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 29–65.

19   The guiding principle of Syriac poetry is a meter determined by syllable count. *Mêmrê* are relatively simple isosyllabic couplets; those attributed to Ephrem are written in 7 + 7 syllable couplets (later known as the "meter of Ephrem"). By contrast, we find a great deal of metrical variation in the approximately 400 *madrāšê* attributed to Ephrem—are written in about fifty different meters of varying levels of complexity. For a general introduction, see Sebastian Brock, "Poetry and Hymnography (3): Syriac," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 661. In the earliest manuscript witnesses (written at least a century after Ephrem's death), each *madrāšâ* is accompanied by a *qālâ* ("melody") title and an *'onîtâ* ("refrain"). Scholars are confident that the original versions possessed these musical

access the original performative settings of specific hymns and homilies, it is certain that they were composed and performed to be heard, with audiences in mind.[20] In fact, female choirs—the ascetic "Daughters of the Covenant"— performed many, if not all, of Ephrem's *madrāšê*.[21] It is imperative, therefore, despite the obvious gaps in our evidence, for us to endeavor to "hear" Ephrem's writings in the context of public performance.

Public performance of Ephrem's *madrāšê* was probably not however, limited to the formal liturgies of the churches of Nisibis and Edessa; rather, as Jeffrey Wickes has recently argued, we should imagine a broader spectrum of situations for their performance, including para-liturgical ecclesial or ascetic settings and even non-liturgical public audiences.[22] Regardless of the original context of their performance, Ephrem's poems share certain performative characterisics which should color our analysis of their contents.[23] Although these

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features. However, the refrains found in these manuscripts do not always fit the themes of the *madrāšê* they accompany, suggesting that the original refrains may have been different in some cases. See Edmund Beck, "Ephräm des Syrers Hymnik," in *Liturgie und Dichtung: Ein interdisziplinäres Kompendium: Gualtero Duerig annum vitae septuagesimum feliciter complenti*, ed. Hansjacob Becker and Reiner Kaczynski, vol. 1 (St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag Erzabtei St. Ottilien, 1983), 345–379, 348–350.

20   In addition, some metrical poems of isosyllabic couplets, and thus formally *mêmrê* (eg. *Fid.* 2 and 3) appear in the *madrāšê* cycles, a fact which complicates our understanding of the distinction between these forms in antiquity. This seems to suggest that the early editors of Ephrem's writings (and perhaps Ephrem himself) did not recognize a particularly great distinction between *mêmrê* and *madrāšê*, at least in terms of metrical form. Perhaps the greatest differentiation between the two in the original context was the method of performance: song or recitation.

21   For ancient evidence for this practice, see Jacob of Sarug, *Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem* 40–43 (ed. Joseph Amar, PO 47, fasc. 1, N. 209 [Turnhout: Brepols, 1995], 34–35). Decades before Jacob's *mêmrâ*, Rabbula of Edessa prescribed that the *bnat qyâmâ* should learn *madrāšê*. See *Rule for the Qyāmâ* § 20 (Arthur Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic Documents: Regarding Legislation Relative to Syrian Asceticism*, Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile 11 [Stockholm: Estonian Theological Society in Exile, 1960], 41). Unlike the *madrāšê*, the *mêmrê* were likely delivered by a single reciter, perhaps Ephrem himself.

22   According to Wickes's recent article, the emphasis on the performance of Ephrem's *madrāšê* in public liturgy has been problematic in that it has "overestimated our ability to infer a performative context from the late antique sources about these *madrāšê*, or from the *madrāšê* themselves, and it has presented the *madrāšê* corpus as more monolithic than it actually is." (Wickes, "Between Liturgy and School," 28). Wickes argues convincingly that at least some of the *madrāšê* were performed in a smaller, ascetic literary setting (Wickes, "Between Liturgy and School," 45–46).

23   For the application of the lens of ancient theater and spectacle to the study of late antique liturgical poetry, I am following in the footsteps of Laura Lieber, "Setting the Stage: The Theatricality of Jewish Aramaic Poetry from Late Antiquity," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 104, no. 4 (2014): 537–572. Although scholars have studied rhetorical elements and performa-

texts employ an array of rhetorical devices that were common in the public oratory of antiquity, such as direct address,[24] anaphora,[25] and apostrophe,[26] they are a stylistically diverse collection of texts. Their poetic voice also varies: sometimes Ephrem addresses his audience as "my brothers" or "my sons," while elsewhere he speaks in the first-person plural ("we/us/our") or the first-person singular. Ephrem at times even adopts the first-person voice of biblical or personified characters such as Virginity,[27] Death,[28] Satan,[29] the city of Nisibis,[30] or the Virgin Mary.[31]

As late antique texts intended for public audiences (whether large or small, liturgical or non-liturgical), Ephrem's *mêmrê* and *madrāšê* belong to a world of public performance which also included entertainments like mime and pantomime shows and public orations.[32] Even more strikingly, they parallel similar traditions of liturgical and para-liturgical religious poetry penned by Jews and

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tive features of other religious texts in Late Antiquity, Lieber is innovative in turning this conversation to Jewish liturgical poetry.

24 E.g., *Azym*. 3.2–3: "Let us consider both lambs, my brothers, / Let us see whether they are the same or different. / Let us weigh and compare the achievements / Of the symbolic lamb and the true lamb." (Ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 6; trans. Walters, *Unleavened Bread*, 24).

25 E.g., *Nat*. 3.13: "Let us thank [ܢܘܕܐ] him who was beaten and who saved us by his wound. / Let us thank [ܢܘܕܐ] him who took away the curse by his thorns. / Let us thank [ܢܘܕܐ] him who killed death by his dying. / Let us thank [ܢܘܕܐ] him who was silent and vindicated us. / Blessed is he whose benefits have laid waste the enemies of God." (Ed. Beck, *Nat.*, 22; trans. McVey, *Hymns*, 85).

26 E.g., *Cruc*. 3.12: "Blessed are you, Room, for nothing has ever been set / Like your table among kings, / nor even in the sanctuary of the Holy of Holies, / upon which was set the showbread." (Ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 50).

27 See *Arm*. 4–9.

28 See *Nis*. 35–41; 52–59; 61–68.

29 See *Nis*. 35; 40–42; 53–60; *Virg*. 12.

30 See *Nis*. 1; 4–12.

31 See *Nat*. 6; 15–17; 19.

32 Theatrical shows and other entertainments, like late antique liturgies, were public spectacles which could attract huge crowds. For a thorough introduction to public performances in late antiquity, see Ruth Webb, *Demons and Dancers: Performance in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), especially 24–43. Many late antique Christian leaders sensed the competition between the two venues and lamented the fact that the theater often seemed to emerge victorious. See Blake Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives: John Chrysostom's Attack on Spiritual Marriage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 13–14, 24–28; Webb, *Demons and Dancers*, 201–202. Although no remains of theaters survive in either Edessa (modern Şanlıurfa) or Nisibis (modern Nusaybin), there is no reason to think that such entertainments were not also popular in those cities. Around the turn of the sixth century, Jacob of Serugh devoted several *mêmrê* to attacking the theater. For a Syriac text and English translation of excerpts from these

Samaritans in late antique Palestine.[33] Like these contemporaneous Near East-
ern traditions, Ephrem's poems employ rhetorical techniques resembling exer-
cises described in Greco-Roman educational handbooks, such as speech-in-
character (known in the handbook tradition as *prosopopoieia* or *ethopoieia*)[34]
and the use of speech to "bring the subject matter vividly before the eyes"
(described in the handbooks as *ekphrasis*).[35]

I do not mean to imply that Ephrem and his Christian contemporaries
actively embraced late antique entertainments like theater and declamation
and simply transferred them to an ecclesial context. Despite similarities in form
and practice between early Christian hymns and homilies and public enter-
tainments such as theater and public oratory, early Christian writers regularly
renounced the theater and theatrical performers.[36] They were also deeply crit-

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homilies, see Cyril Moss, "Jacob of Serugh's Homilies on the Spectacles of the Theatre," *Le Muséon* 48 (1935): 87–112.

33   For these parallels, see Ophir Münz-Manor, "Liturgical Poetry in the Late Antique Near East: A Comparative Approach," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 1, no. 1 (2010): 336–361; Al-phons Rodrigues-Pereira, *Studies in Aramaic Poetry (c. 100 B.C.E.–c. 600 C.E.): Selected Jew-ish, Christian, and Samaritan Poems* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1997); Laura Lieber, "Portraits of Righteousness: Noah in Early Christian and Jewish Hymnography," *Zeitschrift für Religions-und Geistesgeschichte* 61 (2009): 332–355; idem, "On the Road with the Mater Dolorosa: An Exploration of Mother-Son Discourse Performance," *JECS* 24, no. 2 (2016): 265–291; idem, "Scripture Personified: Torah as Character in the Hymns of Marqah," *Jewish Studies Quar-terly* (2017): 195–217.

34   The techniques of *prosopopoeia* and *ethopoeia* appear in the extant ancient handbooks of rhetorical exercises (*progymnasmata*). Aphthonius (*Progymnasmata* 44), and Hermo-genes (*Progymnasmata* 20), differentiate between the two exercises, while Quintilian (*Inst. or.* 9.2.29–37) only mentions *prosopopoeia*. Quintilian's description of the technique is particularly resonant with what we see in Ephrem's writings: "In this kind of figure, it is allowable even to bring down the gods from heaven, evoke the dead, and give voices to cities and states." (*Inst. or.* 9.31 [Russell, LCL]). See Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "2000 NAPS Presidential Address: Spoken Words, Voiced Silence: Biblical Women in Syriac Tradition," *JECS* 9, no. 1 (2001): 105–131; George A. Kennedy, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric* (Prince-ton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 202, 205–206. The emphasis on dialogue also resem-bles ancient Mesopotamian precedence dispute poems, a matter which I will discuss in more detail in chapter 3.

35   On *ekphrasis*, see Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 10; for the origin of this description, see Theon, *Progymnasmata*, 118, l. 7. Ephrem's vivid description of springtime in the exam-ple stanzas from *Res.* 3 cited above resembles the practice of composing an *ekphrasis* on a particular season of the year (see Webb, *Ekphrasis*, 40–41).

36   See Andrew Walker White, *Performing Orthodox Ritual in Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cam-bridge University Press, 2015), 47–50. For a thorough examination of John Chrysostom's attitudes toward the theater, see Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows*, 42–74. This critical attitude toward theater culminated in the attempt by the "Quinisext" Council (or "Council in

ical of the popular interest in public orations, with Gregory of Nazianzus complaining in one sermon: "It is orators they want, not priests."[37] Yet, following Laura Lieber, I would argue that late antique liturgical poetry drew upon certain "theatrical tools"—methods of scene-setting, characterization, and even possibly gestures familiar from oratory and theater.[38] As Lieber explains in another article:

> Both Jewish and Christian poets were attempting similar feats: to make real, in a physical and not simply intellectual way, the experience of sacred history. In order to do so, these poets employed similar techniques, chosen for their appeal and their effectiveness.[39]

We should not be surprised to find that Ephrem and other Christian and Jewish liturgical poets of late antiquity drew upon the performative resources that were available in the larger socio-cultural world of the eastern Mediterranean.

The use of the tools of rhetoric, declamation, and theater, in relatively short, occasional texts, written in poetic meters, lends a distinctly *dramatic* shape to Ephrem's portrayal of a narrative arc like the suffering and death of Jesus. This also cautions against rushing to systematize these texts into a single Ephremic theology. The performative character, poetic form, and occasional nature of Ephrem's *mêmrê* and *madrāšê* were constitutive elements of their message. Ephrem's theological imagination shaped and was shaped by these features.

We would, for instance, miss much of the force of Ephrem's poems which use speech-in-character (e.g., *Nat.* 15–19, sung in the voice of Mary; or *Nis.* 1,4,6,9–12, sung by the personified city of Nisibis), if we failed to examine the use of this

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Trullo") in 692 (Canon 62) to ban theatrical entertainments completely. (Retzleff, "Near Eastern Theatres," 116).

37 *Or.* 42.42 (cited in Leylere, *Theatrical Shows*, 62). The works of George Kennedy offer the best English introductions to late antique rhetoric and oratory (see *A New History of Classical Rhetoric* [Princeton, N.J., 1994]; *Greek Rhetoric under Christian Emperors* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983]).

38 Lieber, "Setting the Stage," 544. Cf. Stanislaw Longosz, "I germi del dramma cristiano nella letteratura patristica," *Studia Patristica* 31 (1997): 59–69. Although the use of particular gestures and body language was a critical and well-attested aspect of both theatrical performances and oratory, we cannot say whether Ephrem and other liturgical poets employed the same kinds of physicality in their performances, though it is certainly possible. For the use of gesture in Roman oratory, see Gregory S. Aldrete, *Gestures and Acclamations in Ancient Rome* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); for the use of gesture and movement in late antique pantomime, see Webb, *Demons and Dancers*, 64–66, 74–77.

39 Laura S. Lieber, "Theater of the Holy: Performative Elements of Late Ancient Hymnography," *HTR* 108 (2015): 327–355, 342.

particular performative technique in late antiquity, or consider the potential effects of employing it in para-liturgical or liturgical settings.[40] Nor, as Susan Harvey argues, can we ignore the rhetorical power of hearing imaginatively-constructed feminine voices sung by female choirs.[41]

For all of these reasons, this book seeks to foreground rhetorical and performative analysis in its examination of Ephrem's treatment of the suffering and death of Jesus.[42] This approach will offer unique perspectives into his use of the Bible and treatment of theological themes. Like an ancient orator or dramaturge alluding to the "canon" of Greco-Roman myth, Ephrem assumed his audiences knew the biblical stories he recounted, cited, and expanded upon. Through his publicly performed works, he sought to bring those familiar sto-

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40   In the case of Ephrem's laments sung by the city of Nisibis, the use of speech-in-character gives vivid expression to real hardships felt by Ephrem's congregation as a result of the Persian sieges of the 350s. The common scholarly tendency here would be to focus on the message or themes of these texts, while giving little attention to the constructed voice of the speaker. See the comments on the use of Satan's voice in Georgia Frank, "Memory and Forgetting in Romanos the Melodist's *On the Newly Baptized*," in *Between Personal and Institutional Religion: Self, Doctrine, and Practice in Late Antique Eastern Christianity*, ed. Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony and Lorenzo Perrone (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 44–45. My approach to these laments of Ephrem would be to emphasize the imagined voice of the city and the audience's opportunity to join in that voice through the refrains. As Lieber observes, the use of a rhetorical practice like *ethopoieia* in liturgical poetry would heighten the audience's participation in the practice. Through the refrains, "the listeners speak *with* the speaker; they 'do' *ethopoiia* themselves." (Lieber, "Theater of the Holy," 333).

41   Susan A. Harvey, "On Mary's Voice: Gendered Words in Syriac Marian Tradition," in *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography*, ed. Patricia Cox Miller and Dale Martin (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 65.

42   In his study of Jacob of Serugh's homilies, Philip Forness draws a helpful distinction— using the work of Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede—between "audience addressed" and "audience invoked." In the context of late antique homilies, the former would refer to the physical audience gathered to hear the preaching of the homily, while the latter would describe the "imagined audience" the author had in mind when composing the text and those who would eventually read a written version of the homily. See Forness, *Preaching Christology in the Roman Near East: A Study of Jacob of Serugh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 29–31. On page 30, Forness summarizes: "the emphasis on the reciprocity between the writer and their diverse audiences suggests the importance of their theory for understanding late antique sermons. Homilists may have chosen to include or exclude information in their sermons in anticipation—or under the influence—of the readership that would later encounter their words. The audience of late antique homilies not only refers to the people gathered to hear the sermon delivered orally but also includes any who might influence the content of the delivery." It is useful to imagine the dual audience that Ephrem might have envisioned encountering his works. It may make more sense to see the complex allusions and wordplay in his *madrāšê* as directed toward an ideal "invoked audience" who might read the text later.

ries to life in a variety of ways, linking them to one another and applying them to a diverse spectrum of issues and audiences. In these creative endeavors, Ephrem drew upon rhetorical practices and performative techniques common in the broader culture of his time. He also relied upon an inheritance of earlier Christian tradition, much of which he shared in common with Greek and Latin Christian sources. Finally, he owed a great deal to the textual sources, literary conventions, and exegetical conventions that were unique to Syriac Christian traditions.

4   Ephrem, the Syriac Tradition, and Early Christianity

4.1   *The Distinctiveness of Ephrem and the Syriac Tradition*
Scholarly interest in Ephrem's treatment of Jesus' death has tended to focus—perhaps unsurprisingly—on particular interpretations of the Passion narrative that are unique to Ephrem or the Syriac Christian tradition.[43] The problem

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43   Scholarship on Ephrem's treatment of the Passion narrative is fragmentary. Scholars have primarily focused upon describing particular symbolic interpretations of the events of the narrative in Ephrem's writings. Jean Gribomont's article "Le triomphe de Pâques d'après S. Ephrem" is the most extensive study of Ephrem's portrayals of the death of Christ. Gribomont touches on a number of issues of relevance for any study of Ephrem's portrayal of the death of Christ, such as Adam-Christ typology (162–163), the salvation of the Peoples (159), Christ as priest and sacrifice (168–171), and the descent to Sheol (174–179). However, Gribomont only draws upon a select canon of sources, devoting a few pages to important themes and images in each. See Jean Gribomont, "Le triomphe de Pâques d'après S. Ephrem," *PO* 4, no. 1–2 (1973): 147–189. For more specific examples, see: Luise Abramowski, "Narsai, Ephräm und Kyrill über Jesu Verlassenheitsruf Matth. 27,46," in *Crossroad of Cultures: Studies in Liturgy and Patristics in Honor of Gabriele Winkler*, ed. Hans-Jürgen Feulner, Elena Velkovska, and Robert F. Taft, *OCA* 260 (Rome: Pontificio Instituto Orientale, 2000), 43–67; Robert Murray, "The Lance Which Re-Opened Paradise: A Mysterious Reading in the Early Syriac Fathers," *OCP* 39, no. 1 (1973): 224–234; Sebastian P. Brock, "The Mysteries Hidden in the Side of Christ [Jn 19:34 in Syriac Tradition]," *Sobornost: Eastern Churches Quarterly* 7, no. 6 (1978): 462–472; Edmund Beck, "Ephräm und der Diatessaronkommentar im Abschnitt über die Wunder beim Tode Jesu am Kreuz," *OrChr* 77 (1993): 104–119; Javier Teixidor, "Le thème de la descente aux enfers chez saint Éphrem," *L'Orient Syrien* 6 (1961): 25–40; Buchan, *Blessed Is He Who Has Brought Adam from Sheol*. Gerard Rouwhorst's detailed study of Ephrem's Paschal hymn cycles is also salient to this study, as Rouwhorst seeks to relate these hymns to the celebration of the Paschal feast in fourth century Nisibis and Edessa. (G.A.M. Rouwhorst, *Les hymnes pascales d'Ephrem de Nisibe. Analyse théologique et recherche sur l'evolution de la fête pascale chrétienne à Nisibis et à Edesse et dans quelques Églises voisines au quatrième siècle*, 2 vols., Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 7 [Leiden: Brill, 1989]).

with this approach is that it could lead us to lose sight of Ephrem's parallels with common Christian ideas about the death of Jesus. This study will also explore the degree to which Ephrem and the Syriac Christian literary tradition adopted and adapted theological motifs that had already become commonplace across the Christian world. One of the most significant outcomes, then, of examining Ephrem's treatment of the death of Jesus will be to demonstrate how deeply embedded in early Christian imagination the Passion narratives had become by the fourth century, and how, for all of its distinctiveness, the early Syriac tradition shared much in common with other early Christian sources.

This is essential, because despite the many strengths of twentieth-century Syriac scholarship, scholars have tended to overemphasize the uniqueness of the early Syriac tradition over and against the Greek- and Latin-speaking Christian traditions.[44] Research on Ephrem since the late twentieth century (especially influenced by Edmund Beck, Robert Murray, and Sebastian Brock) has sought to portray Ephrem as a distinctive Syriac (or Semitic) theologian by highlighting his unique "symbolic" theological method.[45] Robert Murray, for instance, distinguishes the Ephremic "theory of symbolism" from both a modern "fundamentalist" hermeneutic and the "allegorism" of Origen, positioning Ephrem as a unique exegetical voice in the Christian tradition.[46] This characterization recruits Ephrem into a modern polemic against biblical literalism, while overstating the difference between Ephrem and Origen, whom Murray presents as the extremist exegetical counterpoint to Ephrem's moderation. While such approaches have drawn welcome attention to Ephrem and early Syriac Christianity and made Ephrem's works more accessible, they have sometimes had the effect of overemphasizing his uniqueness and isolating the study of Ephrem from the wider Christian world of the fourth century. But are they accurate? How distinctive was Ephrem in light of the larger world of the fourth-century Eastern Mediterranean?

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44   For a similar critique, see Christine Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy: Ephrem's Hymns in Fourth-Century Syria* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 65–67.

45   For example, Sebastian Brock writes of Ephrem: "Here is a genuinely Asian Christianity which is free from the specifically European cultural, historical and intellectual trappings that have become attached to the main streams of Christianity." (Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*, Cistercian Studies 124 [Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Press, 1992], 15).

46   Robert Murray, "The Theory of Symbolism in St. Ephrem's Theology," *Parole de l'Orient* 6 (1975–1976): 1–20, 6.

4.2   *Ephrem and Greco-Syriac Culture*

This question is one of the most persistent and challenging for scholarship on Ephrem and early Syriac Christianity.[47] The Syriac Christian literary tradition emerged out of the diverse border region of northern Mesopotamia, at the crossroads of Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian, and traditional "pagan" religious cultures. Yet to what degree were the earliest Syriac writers (of the third and fourth centuries CE) in dialogue with or influenced by Greco-Roman law, literature, philosophy, and science? How conversant were they with other Aramaic-speaking religious cultures of the region, particularly the emerging rabbinic form of Judaism? Due to a paucity of sources, these questions remain difficult to answer.[48] Nevertheless, they are of great relevance for understanding the relationship between Ephrem and the broader Christian tradition.

For the purposes of this study, the most salient issue is that of Ephrem's connection with Greek Christian culture. Scholars have often portrayed Ephrem as ignorant of the Greek language and hostile to Greek education, making much of his warnings against the "wisdom of the Greeks."[49] For some, this apparent antagonism toward Greek culture attests to Ephrem's theological independence (and that of the early Syriac Christian tradition more broadly) vis-à-vis the Greco-Roman cultural world and the Greek- and Latin-speaking Christian communities. In the most extreme iteration of this view, Ephrem represents a native "Semitic" tradition with roots directly in Judaism.[50] As Ute Possekel

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47   For an introduction to the early Syriac Christian tradition, see Lucas Van Rompay, "The East (3): Syria and Mesopotamia," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 362–386.

48   The best attempt to address these questions is still Robert Murray's concluding essay "In Search of the Sources," appended to his classic *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*, rev. ed. (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 279–347.

49   See Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 31; Peter Bruns, "Arius hellenizans?— Ephräm der Syrer und die neoarianischen Kontroversen seiner Zeit. Ein Beitrag zur Rezeption des Nizanums im syrischen Sprachraum," *Zeitschrift fur Kirchengeschichte* 101 (1990): 21–57, 47. For the warnings against "Greek wisdom," see *Fid*. 2.24. See also *Fid*. 47.11, 79.3, 87.4.

50   See Arthur Vööbus' comments on the earliest history of the Syriac Christian tradition in *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, Vol. 1, CSCO 184, Subsidia 17 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1958), 3–9; cf. Robert Murray, "The Characteristics of the Earliest Syriac Christianity," in *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period*, eds. Nina G. Garsoïan, Thomas F. Mathews, and Robert W. Thomson (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), 3–16, 6; Sebastian Brock, "From Antagonism to Assimilation: Syriac Attitudes to Greek Learning," in *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period* (Dumbarton Oaks Symposium, 1980), eds. Nina G. Garsoïan, Thomas F. Mathews, and Robert Thompson (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), 17–34, 17–19; Bruns, "Arius hellenizans," 21.

argues, at least part of the reason for this scholarly trajectory seems to be a "romanticized" ideal of the Syriac church as maintaining an uninterrupted tradition from the earliest Christians.[51] More recently, scholars have found a great deal of evidence that challenges such a portrayal.

First, there is little reason to interpret Ephrem's attack on "the Greeks" as an attack on Greek language and culture. It is unlikely that Ephrem's disdain flowed out of patriotic hostility toward the tongue of a foreign oppressor. Nor, indeed, is it likely that he harbored ill-will toward Greek-speaking Christians. Rather, extensive evidence from other Christian (and even earlier Jewish) sources suggests we should understand the term "Greek" as roughly equivalent to "pagan" or "idol-worshipper."[52]

Second, as Yifat Monnickendam notes, it is important to distinguish between Ephrem's level of familiarity with the Greek *language* and his knowledge of *traditions or literature* of Greek origin. While Ephrem seems to have not known Greek well enough to write in the language, he also participated in a literate culture heavily influenced by the mainstream cultures of the Greco-Roman world.[53] By Ephrem's lifetime, Greek language and culture had had a certain level of cachet and even dominance in the Levant for over 600 years. Greek was the tongue of Alexander and his successors, who established outposts of Greek culture and language throughout Syria and Mesopotamia. Ephrem's home city of Nisibis had borne the Greek name of "Antioch in Mygdonia" since the time of the Seleucids.[54] Even Ûrhāy, the urban heartland of the Syriac dialect, had

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51   Ute Possekel, *Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts on the Writings of Ephrem the Syrian*, CSCO 102 (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 8.

52   Cf. Sebastian Brock, "From Antagonism to Assimilation," 19. On the Christian use of the term "Hellene," see Alan G. Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); 16–18; Christopher P. Jones, *Between Pagan and Christian* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), 2–3. As Cameron notes, Christians began to adopt the term to describe non-Christians in the Greek-speaking east as early as the second century, and it had become such a commonplace that the emperor Julian intentionally re-appropriated it as a label for traditional religious cults (Cameron, *The Last Pagans*, 17–18).

53   Yifat Monnickendam, "How Greek is Ephrem's Syriac? Ephrem's Commentary on Genesis as a Case Study," *JECS* 23 no. 2 (2015): 213–244, 215; Sebastian P. Brock, "Greek Words in Ephrem and Narsai: A Comparative Sampling," *Aram* 12 (1999): 439–449; Fergus Millar, "The Evolution of the Syrian Orthodox Church in the Pre-Islamic Period: From Greek to Syriac?" *JECS* 21 (2013): 43–92; idem, idem, "Greek and Syriac in Edessa and Osrhoene, C.E. 213–363," *Scripta Classical Israelica* 30, no. 1 (2011): 93–111; idem, "Greek and Syriac in Edessa: From Ephrem to Rabbula (CE 363–435)," *Semitica et Classica* 4, no. 1 (2011): 99–113;

54   See Possekel, *Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts*, 15.

possessed its dual identity as the *polis* of Edessa (named for a Macedonian city) since the time of its re-founding by Seleucus I Nicator in 303 BCE.[55]

By the first centuries of the Common Era, Greek influence in art,[56] architecture,[57] and public inscriptions was well-established, especially in Edessa and to the west of the Euphrates.[58] The earliest surviving Christian material artifacts paint a similar portrait. The oldest dated Christian inscription in Mesopotamia is a Greek inscription found on a cube-shaped baptistry in Ephrem's home city of Nisibis, dated to during Ephrem's time of service to that Christian community (359/60 CE).[59] Produced in Edessa less than forty years after Ephrem's death (in 411 CE), the oldest dated Syriac codex, BL Add. 12150, is entirely composed of translations from Greek into Syriac.[60] Such a codex reveals the pres-

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55 Steven K. Ross, *Roman Edessa: Politics and Culture on the Eastern Fringes of the Roman Empire, 114–242 CE* (London: Routledge, 2001), 8.

56 See, e.g., the two mosaics of a phoenix and of Orpheus found in the vicinity of Edessa (photographs in Segal, *Edessa*, plates 43 and 44). For the Syriac text, see H.J.W. Drijvers, ed., *Old Syriac (Edessean) Inscriptions*, Semitic Study Series 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 39–41. The Syriac text of the Orpheus mosaic can be found in John F. Healey, "A New Syriac Mosaic Inscription," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 51, no. 2 (2006): 313–327. Other important recent mosaic discoveries of figures from Greco-Roman mythology and epics are outlined in Janine Balty and Françoise Briquel Chatonnet, "Nouvelles mosaïques inscrites d'Osrhoène," *Monuments et mémoires de la Fondation Eugène Piot* 79 (2000): 31–72; Komait Abdallah, Alain Desreumaux, and Mohamad Al-Kaid, "Nouvelles mosaïques d'Osrhoène découvertes in situ en Syrie du nord," *Journal of Mosaic Research* 13 (2020): 1–34.

57 See Marlia Mundell Mango, "The Continuity of the Classical Tradition in the Art and Architecture of Northern Mesopotamia," in *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period* (Dumbarton Oaks Symposium, 1980), eds. Nina G. Garsoïan, Thomas F. Mathews, and Robert Thompson (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), 115–134.

58 Although Steven Ross rejects viewing the situation in terms of a clash of two distinct cultures (with "Hellenism" on the one side and "Syriac" or a "Parthian/Semitic mixture" on the other), he nevertheless imagines a process of "Romanization" or "Westernization" in Edessa which he says began in the third century CE, and in which the native "Mesopotamian" character of the city remained strong (Ross, *Roman Edessa*, 116). Such a characterization, as Bas ter Haar Romeny points out, is problematic in that it presumes knowledge of a "Mesopotamian" culture for which we have no earlier evidence (Bas ter Haar Romeny, "Hypotheses on the Development of Judaism and Christianity in Syriac in the Period after 70 C.E.," in *Matthew and the Didache: Two Documents from the Same Jewish-Christian Milieu?*, ed. Huub van de Sandt [Assen, Netherlands: Royal Van Gorkum, 2005], 20).

59 For this inscription, see Gertrude Bell, *The Churches and Monasteries of the Tur Abdin*, rev. Marlia Mundell Mango (London: Pindar Press, 1989), 143–145.

60 See William Wright, *Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum acquired since the year 1838*, Vol. 2 (London: British Museum, 1871), 631–633. See also W.H.P. Hatch, *An Album of Dated Syriac Manuscripts* (Boston: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1946).

ence of an active Christian culture of Greek-Syriac translation in northern Mesopotamia by the end of the fourth century at the latest.[61] Regardless of whether Ephrem participated in these literary circles during his years in Edessa, several studies have demonstrated that he was familiar with aspects of Roman law,[62] Greco-Roman philosophy (especially of the Stoic variety),[63] Greek poetic tropes,[64] and exegetical traditions originating in Greek-speaking Christianity.[65]

Still, despite his familiarity with aspects of Greco-Roman literary culture, Ephrem used fewer Greek loan words and borrowed from Greek literary style far less frequently than Syriac writers in the centuries that followed. The full extent of the "Hellenization" of Syriac literature was still in the future.[66] That being said, it would be a mistake to overemphasize the cultural separation in Ephrem's lifetime. As H.J.W. Drijvers rightly argues, "Syriac does not represent a culture different than Greek; both languages are expressions and vehicles of the same Hellenistic civilization in Syria, the traditions of which go back to the former Seleucid empire."[67]

For all of these reasons, I have no intention to position Ephrem as an independent indigenous voice in the early Christian world. I do not think that such a characterization is consistent with the evidence. Rather, my goal in this study is to explore Ephrem's creative transformation of themes and ideas he had

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61 On this point, see, e.g., Millar, "Greek and Syriac in Edessa," 106.

62 See Yifat Monnickendam, "The Kiss and the Earnest," *Le Muséon* 125 no. 3–4 (2012): 307–334.

63 Ephrem's familiarity with Greco-Roman philosophy is evident throughout his *Prose Refutations*, in which he frequently references the teachings of the Stoic and Platonist schools. For Ephrem's knowledge of these sources, see Edmund Beck, "τεχνη und τεχνιτης bei dem Syrer Ephräm," *OCP* 47 (1981): 295–331, 330; Ute Possekel, *Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts*.

64 See Rouwhorst, "L'évocation du mois de Nisan."

65 See Monnickendam, "How Greek is Ephrem's Syriac?"

66 See especially Sebastian P. Brock, *From Ephrem to Romanos: Interactions between Syriac and Greek in Late Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1999). Also see idem, "Greek and Syriac in Late Antique Syria," in *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World*, eds. A.K. Bowman and G. Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 149–160, 159; idem, "Greek Words in Syriac: Some General Features," *Scripta Classica Israelica* 15 (1996): 251–262; 253; Aaron Michael Butts, *Language Change in the Wake of Empire: Syriac in its Greco-Roman Context* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2016).

67 H.J.W. Drijvers, "Syrian Christianity and Judaism," in *The Jews among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*, ed. Judith M. Lieu, John North, and Tessa Rajak (London: Routledge, 1992), 126. Cf. Fergus Millar's description of Edessa as a "non-Mediterranean descendent of Greek culture" (Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East: 31BC–AD337* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993], 472).

inherited from earlier Christian theological discourse related to the death of Jesus, drawing attention to his commonalities with Greek and Latin-speaking Christian writers where they appear. When appropriate, my analysis will also highlight his employment of distinctly Syriac traditions and his use of methods shared in common with Jewish exegesis, and what appear to be his own creative innovations. Throughout that process, I pay particular attention to the most distinctive aspect of Ephrem's work: the literary form and performative orientation of his *mêmrê* and *madrāšê*.

5   State of the Question: The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity

Therefore, although this book is a study of Ephrem, it is not a study of Ephrem *alone*. In other words, this book does not present an Ephrem isolated from the early Christian world, but rather attempts to draw him into a larger and longstanding scholarly conversation on the death of Jesus in early Christianity, a discussion which has broader consequences for the interpretation of early Christian thought.

5.1   *Early Approaches: Patristic Atonement Theology*
The scholarship on this subject goes back at least to F.C. Baur, and in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the topic was caught up in debates over atonement theology.[68] However, these standard accounts of the "work of Christ" of "doctrine of atonement" in antiquity make no mention of Ephrem. In fact, perspectives from Syriac-speaking Christianity are entirely absent from this scholarly literature, which tends to cite a particular "canon" of early Christian sources, generally including: Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, Augustine, Leo, and Gregory the Great. This narrow set of sources masks the wide variety of reflections on the death of Jesus across the breadth of early Christianity.

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68   Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Die christliche Lehre von der Versöhnung in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung von der ältesten Zeit bis auf die neueste* (Tübingen: C.F. Osiander, 1838). See also Adolf Harnack, *History of Dogma*, Vol. 3, trans. James Millar (London: Williams and Norgate, 1897), 305–310; Albrecht Ritschl, *A Critical History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*, trans. J. Sutherland Black (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1872); Robert S. Franks, *A History of the Doctrine of the Work of Christ in Its Ecclesiastical Development*, vol. 1, 2 vols. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1918); Hastings Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology* (London: Macmillan, 1919); L.W. Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1920).

The general lack of attention to ancient reflections on the death of Jesus is in part the legacy of a history of scholarly dismissal of early Christian "atonement theology". Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historians of doctrine, like Albrecht Ritschl, Robert S. Franks, Hastings Rashdall, and L.W. Grensted, tended to find early Christian theologies of the death of Christ as inadequate at best, and at worst, irrelevant or even immoral.[69] The so-called "ransom theory," that Christ's death paid a "ransom" of some kind to Satan (or in some cases, Death) in order to liberate humanity, particularly drew the ire of these scholars, who in turns described it as "mythical,"[70] "bizarre,"[71] or "childish".[72]

The Swedish scholar Gustaf Aulén famously contested these earlier approaches in his now-classic 1930 work *Christus Victor*.[73] Aulén portrayed early Christian views of the atonement in a far more favorable light, arguing that they constituted what he called the "classic idea" of atonement (which he called "Christus Victor"). According to Aulén, the "classic idea" saw the death of Christ as a triumph over the powers of sin, death, and the devil. It was a "dramatic" account of the atonement with a "dualistic" background, in which God in Christ won a victory over the opposing powers.[74] I should note that Aulén's description of early Christian atonement theology as fundamentally "dramatic"

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69   Robert Franks, for instance, describes the theology of Gregory of Nyssa as "morally inferior" to that of Athanasius, because Gregory emphasizes the ransom paid to the Devil rather than the death of Christ as a satisfaction of the divine decree (Franks, *Work of Christ*, 80).

70   Ritschl, *Critical History*, 5.

71   Grensted, *Short History*, 35.

72   Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement*, 306.

73   Aulén, *Christus Victor*. The term "Christus Victor" is now well-established in the theological lexicon, though in some contexts, it appears to reflect little more than what Ben Pugh has called a "trendy slogan related only in the most general way to the Aulén paradigm." See Ben Pugh, "'Kicking the Daylights out of the Devil': The Victory Motif in Some Recent Atonement Theology," *European Journal of Theology* 23, no. 1 (April 2014): 32–42, 34. That is not to say that Aulén's thesis has lacked critical reactions. In fact, Aulén's work has provoked a number of critical responses over the years, particularly from systematic theologians. See, for example, two early Lutheran critiques: George O. Evenson, "Critique of Aulen's Christus Victor," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 28, no. 10 (1957): 738–749; Ted Peters, "Atonement in Anselm and Luther, Second Thoughts about Gustaf Aulen's Christus Victor," *Lutheran Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (1972): 301–314. Also significant is the criticism of Colin Gunton, who argues that Aulén's account becomes little more than a "story of the gods", and thus any account of the cross as victory must be both a *human* and *divine* victory. (Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality, and the Christian Tradition* [London: T & T Clark, 2003], 59).

74   Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 4–5.

aligns quite well with Ephrem's manifold portrayals of the death of Jesus, as I described them above.[75]

5.2   *Reframing Early Christian Atonement Theology*

Yet all of this scholarship, including the revisionist approach popularized by Aulén, rests on some problematic assumptions. Aulén, for one, had a very particular idea of what constituted a proper "atonement" theology—"a work wherein God reconciles the world to himself and is at the same time reconciled."[76] Aulén's predecessors also tended to dismiss early Christian sources on these general grounds—that they were often mythologized, theologically-muddled, and deeply flawed as accounts of divine–human reconciliation. For these scholars, early Christian writers did not appear to offer sufficient answers to their preconceived understanding of the doctrine of atonement.[77] Although Aulén took a different perspective on the value of the "classic view" than most of his predecessors, he nevertheless similarly tried to fit early Christian accounts of the meaning of the death of Jesus into his preconceived understanding of "atonement." Aulén framed his project as a comparison of three distinct "views" of atonement, and in the process downplayed the diversity of images and metaphors used by early Christians to describe Jesus' death.[78] More

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75   Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 158.

76   Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 4.

77   In the case of Ritschl, for instance, his theological interests centered on "justification" (which he understood as the removal of guilt), and "reconciliation," (which he understood as the removal of enmity between humanity and God effected by Christ's death). He thus found little of value in the early Christian emphasis upon the "redemption" of humanity from the power of the devil or death. (See Ritschl, *A Critical History*, 5, 8). Jean Rivière's (understated) reaction to Ritschl's work bears repeating: "Ritschl's thesis, being embodied in a manual of theology manifestly written to prove a theory, might be suspected of not being an impartial statement of the question." (Jean Rivière, *The Doctrine of the Atonement: A Historical Essay*, trans. Luigi Cappadelta, vol. 1, 2 vols. [London: Kegan Paul, 1909], 30). Similarly, in his critique of Rashdall, H.E.W. Turner noted that Rashdall, in an effort to defend against an undue emphasis on the "substitutionary Atonement," stressed "unduly the inspiratory and illuminative character of the Death of Christ. Yet it would be rather surprising if either Abelard or S. Anselm taken by himself represented the full truth about the Patristic period." (H.E.W. Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption: A Study of the Development of Doctrine during the First Five Centuries* [London: A.R. Mowbray, 1952], 11).

78   In a traditional Catholic treatment of the "doctrine of redemption," Louis Richard rightly critiques Aulén and other Protestant theologians for downplaying "sacrificial" themes in early Christian sources. He tries to demonstrate the broad prevalence of such themes in the East as well as in the West, but his analysis remains little more than surface-level. Louis Richard, *The Mystery of the Redemption*, trans. Joseph Horn (Dublin: Cahill, 1965), 156–168.

recent scholarship has begun to recognize the diversity within early Christian sources, and to speak more of "themes," "categories," or "trends" of imagery.[79]

Furthermore, as Peter Martens has argued, by framing early Christian accounts of Jesus' death as accounts of "atonement," Aulén made the basic "category error" of equating the death of Jesus with the doctrine of atonement.[80] The idea of atonement, or reconciliation to God, certainly existed in early Christian writings, but early Christians like Ephrem tended not to limit that category to the death of Jesus. They saw atoning events and actions throughout the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and into the life of the Christian community (through deeds like baptism, penitence, charity, and martyrdom).[81] In the past few years, these areas have proven fruitful venues for new scholarly inquiry.[82] Gary Anderson in particular has highlighted the deep

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79 For this language, see, e.g., Michael Slusser, "Primitive Christian Soteriological Themes," *Theological Studies* 44 (1983): 555–569; Brian Daley, s.j., "'He Himself is Our Peace' (Eph 2:14): Early Christian Views of Redemption in Christ" in *The Redemption: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on Christ as Redeemer*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Jendall, and Gerald O'Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 154. The standard handbooks of the field likewise emphasize the diversity and complexity of early Christian portrayals of the death and resurrection of Jesus. See Frances Young, "Atonement," in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Routledge, 1999); J.A. McGuckin, "Atonement," *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 39. Several studies have begun to dig more deeply into common imagery like the "ransom" or the "deception" of the devil. For instance, Eugene TeSelle identifies at least three variations of the "ransom" motif in early Christian literature. These include the metaphor of ransom proper (a straightforward exchange between God and Satan), the more complex idea of "abuse of power" on the part of the demonic forces, and the "demythologized" notion of the overcoming of death. (Eugene TeSelle, "The Cross as Ransom," *JECS* 4, no. 2 [1996]: 147–170). See also Nicholas Constas, "The Last Temptation of Satan: Divine Deception in Greek Patristic Interpretations of the Passion Narrative," *HTR* 97, no. 2 (2004): 139–163. An excellent engagement with early Christian material also appears in Nicolas E. Lombardo, O.P., *The Father's Will*: Christ's Crucifixion and the Goodness of God (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 181–239.

80 I am grateful to Prof. Martens for sharing his yet-unpublished critique of Aulén's *Christus Victor*. (Peter W. Martens, "Revisiting a Theological Classic: Gustaf Aulén's *Christus Victor* and the Future of the Patristic Doctrine of the Atonement" [unpublished paper, 2014], 13).

81 See Martens, "Revisiting a Theological Classic," 11–12.

82 See Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 111–132. See also Roman Garrison, *Redemptive Almsgiving in Early Christianity* (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic, 1993); Peter Brown, *The Ransom of the Soul: Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western Christianity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015). On martyrdom as a participation in the defeat of Satan and death, see Candida Moss, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), especially 87–102.

connections between the metaphorical conception of sin as "debt," redemption as "debt payment," and almsgiving as a means of balancing the scales through "depositing" into the heavenly treasury. He has reframed the atonement issue by approaching it from the perspectives of ancient Jewish and Christian works (including, notably Ephrem and several other Syriac writers).

5.3   *Ephrem, the Atonement, and the Death of Jesus*

But the inverse is also true, and, for the purposes of this study, even more pertinent. Not only did early Christians not limit "atonement" to the death of Jesus, they also saw the event of Jesus' death as significant for more reasons than atonement. The death of Jesus was a locus of many other effects which brought about fundamental changes for the human race.[83] Like most other early Christian writers, Ephrem understood such consequences to include the rejection of the old covenant and establishment of the new, the deliverance from the power of death and guarantee of the future resurrection, and the end to Satan's power over the human race through "demonic" pagan religious practices. Early Christians like Ephrem also inveighed against what they saw as improper understandings of the death of Jesus, and even used those events to frame the behavior of themselves and their ecclesial opponents. A well-rounded study of Ephrem will therefore take into account his rhetorical use of Jesus' death in dialogue with groups like the Marcionites, Bardaisanites, and Manichaeans.

It goes without saying that early Christians wrote in a variety of literary forms and for diverse audiences. Yet the scholarship on early Christian atonement theology has tended to systematize the thought of particular early Christian figures, with little regard to the genres and audiences of individual texts. With Ephrem, who primarily wrote hymns and homilies, we have the opportunity to take seriously the relationship between form and content, and the performative-rhetorical dimensions of different texts.

It is little wonder that—applying later categories like "atonement" without appropriate problematization—scholars have so often been baffled and even offended by early Christian portrayals of the death of Christ. In fact, early Christians had a more expansive understanding of both "atonement" as a category and the death of Jesus as an event. This study, therefore, reframes the issue away from the subject of divine–human reconciliation (or atonement) and toward the polyvalent significance of the death of Jesus for Ephrem, as a represen-

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83   See Martens, "Revisiting a Theological Classic," 8–11.

tative of the broader trajectory of early Christian reflection. For this reason, I have made the intentional choice to refer to the subject of this study as the "death of Jesus" rather than the "atonement" or even the "work of Christ." Framing this study as an examination of the death of Jesus in Ephrem's writings provides the opportunity to consider the wide spectrum of effects he saw as flowing from that great and terrible event that lay at the heart of early Christian faith.

6   Sources for This Study

Ephrem never wrote a systematic treatise *On the Death of Christ*. Rather, allusions and references to that event appear in a variety of texts written in different genres for a number of situations and audiences. While the sources for this study (by nature of its topic) are primarily Ephrem's metrical *madrāšê* and *mêmrê*, I will draw upon his entire extant corpus, including, as relevant, prose discourses and biblical commentaries. Generally speaking, I have tended to follow scholarly consensus in setting the parameters for which writings to accept as the product of Ephrem. I have also included in my analysis several writings of disputed authenticity (most notably the *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, the *Madrāšê on Abraham Qîdûnāyâ*,[84] and the three verse *Mêmrê on Reproof*).[85] I will attempt to compensate for the potential problems with this approach (which could gloss over the unique contexts and audiences of individual writings) by highlighting the larger context in which particular quotations and references are embedded. I will pay constant attention to the genre, audience, and objectives of each individual text.[86]

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84   Edmund Beck, ed., *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen auf Abraham Kidunaya und Julianos Saba*, CSCO 322, Syr. 140 (Leuven: Peeters, 1972). Although Beck doubted their authenticity, Andrew Hayes has recently offered compelling evidence for attributing the first five hymns to Ephrem. (*Icons of the Heavenly Merchant*: *Ephrem and Pseudo-Ephrem in the Madrashe in Praise of Abraham of Qidun* [Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2016]).

85   Beck entitles these *mêmrê* the *Sermones de Reprehensione* (Beck, *Sermones* I, #1–3, CSCO 305–306, Syr. 130–131 [Leuven: Peeters, 1970]). These three *mêmrê* appear in one of the earliest Ephremic manuscripts (BM Add. 14573). In the introduction to his translation of these texts (CSCO 306, Syr. 131), Beck describes the first *mêmrâ* as "undoubtedly genuine" (vi). The second *mêmrâ*, too, he regards, as the work of Ephrem (viii). He is less absolute in his assessment of the third, but argues for its authenticity (viii–x).

86   A complete discussion of the literary genres in which Ephrem wrote can be found in the Appendix.

7   The Plan of This Book

The structure of this book unfolds as series of close readings of selections from Ephrem's writings. Each chapter weds these close readings to broader explorations of theological themes, rhetorical techniques, and poetic features. The book will therefore explore a wide range of issues relevant to the writings of Ephrem, including his use of Syriac biblical sources, oral traditions, and exegetical conventions; points of theological similarity between Ephrem and Greek and Latin Christian sources; Ephrem's engagement with theological opponents (especially Marcionites, Bardaisanites, and Manichaeans); and the intersection between literary form, performance, and theology. In the process, this study will reveal both Ephrem's inheritance of what had already become traditional elements of Christian theological discourse, and his imaginative adaptation of those motifs, primarily through publicly performed hymns and homilies. That being said, I will generally avoid making potentially-fraught claims of direct influence. Rather, I will remain focused on examining the internal dynamics of Ephrem's use of biblical passages and employment of theological images and concepts—in other words, his theological imagination. Together, these close readings, directed towards bigger questions of early Christian literature, will shed light on Ephrem's place in the northern Mesopotamian world of the fourth century.

The first chapter of this book focuses on Ephrem's most frequently cited passage from the Gospel Passion narrative—Matthew 27:52–53.[87] This, I argue, was the most important biblical passage for shaping Ephrem's understanding of the significance of the Passion and death of Jesus. To explain Ephrem's fixation on this passage, I delve into the larger questions regarding the gospel text Ephrem knew (the Syriac Diatessaron) and the interpretive traditions upon which he drew. I also consider how Ephrem operated as a reader, reusing and reapplying biblical traditions. The image of the dead rising to life at the voice of the dying Jesus was an abundant source of allusion for Ephrem as he imagined and reworked the Christian narrative of the defeat of death and the promise of resurrection, especially in publicly recited poems and homilies. For Ephrem, this critical passage was not a source to be commented upon, but a rich vein of sacred language and imagery to be reapplied and recontextualized. He used it to emphasize the divine identity and power of Jesus the creator (over and

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87   I intentionally refer to this as the "Passion narrative" (singular), since Ephrem's primary Gospel text was the Diatessaron gospel harmony, which contained only one Passion narrative.

against rival theologies of the time) and to envision the eschatological resurrection. The chapter concludes with an examination of Ephrem's conflict with the Bardaisanite theology of death and the resurrection, a debate which, for Ephrem at least, centered on the interpretation of the Bible.

The next chapter of the book explores how Ephrem received and modified earlier Christian traditions about Jesus' death as a defeat of Death. In particular, I focus on how Ephrem used techniques of personification and speech-in-character to fill gaps in the Gospel narrative of Jesus' crucifixion. Ephrem is one of the first known Christian writers to give voice to Death as a character and to imagine the death of Jesus and his descent to Sheol in dramatic fashion and cosmic perspective. I first examine Death's portrayal in Ephrem's *Mêmrâ on Our Lord*, comparing Ephrem's narrative of the defeat of Death to the fourth-century Greek Christian "fishhook" motif. Next, I explore Ephrem's dramatic dialogue poems on Jesus' descent to Sheol (*Nis.* 36–42). These poems are distinctive among late antique accounts of the descent to the underworld in their singular focus on the personified character of Death. I argue that the central role Ephrem accords Death as the character Jesus defeats through his crucifixion is a legacy of earlier Syriac Christian traditions which described Jesus as victorious over a monstrous and gluttonous Death. Drawing on the literary tools of personification, Ephrem transformed these earlier allusions into a full-fledged character who occupies the central role in the dialogue poems contained in the *On Nisibis madrāšê* collection. Even so, Ephrem's portrayal of the character of Death and the descent to Sheol narrative is not entirely consistent, but reflects the different priorities of the various poems in question.

The issue of performance raises the question of the social environment in which Ephrem wrote and the roles his writings must have played in forging Christian identity over and against religious "others." Given what we know of the diverse religious landscape of fourth-century northern Mesopotamia and the central role of anti-Jewish polemic in early Christian discourse, we should not be surprised to find that Ephrem retold the narratives of the Passion and death of Jesus in ways that accentuated Jewish culpability. The third chapter explores how the Passion narrative served as a locus of anti-Jewish polemic in Ephrem's *madrāšê*. In these poems, Ephrem reworked the gospel accounts to create dramas of Jewish rejection, often featuring the personification of "Daughter Zion." My primary argument in this chapter is that the portrayals of the "crucifying Jews" in Ephrem's retellings of the Passion narrative are not uniform and unchanging, but serve particular purposes within the occasional contexts of different texts. The ways in which Ephrem employed anti-Jewish motifs could shift significantly depending on the literary genre or performative con-

text of the source in question. These shifting depictions of Jewish involvement in the death of Jesus attest both to the complex role Jews played in late antique Christian polemic and to the dramatic and occasional nature of Ephrem's theological imagination.

Ephrem's social environment also shaped his language and the metaphors he utilized to express abstract ideas. In the fourth chapter, I explore the primary set of metaphors—the language of economic transactions—Ephrem utilized to conceive of the role of Jesus' death in the forgivnesss of sin and redemption of humanity. I argue that Ephrem's use of metaphors like payment of debts and dispensing of gifts should be seen in the context of the social relationships of patronage and benefaction. Ephrem envisioned the death of Jesus as initiating a new relationship between humanity and its divine benefactor, a relationship which carried expectations for both the giver and the recipients. Yet Ephrem's use of these metaphors reflects a certain caution (especially when it comes to the concept of "ransom"). I contend, therefore, that Ephrem's familiarity with Marcionite Christian theology (which likewise utilized economic metaphors, but in ways Ephrem found problematic) shaped the ways he used economic language to speak of Jesus' redemptive death.

The fifth chapter explores the many ways in which Ephrem imagined the time and chronology of Jesus' Passion and death and how it was commemorated. Ephrem consistently sought to demonstrate the harmonious relationship between creation, scripture, and the calendar, which he portrayed as attesting to the month, day, and even hour of the death of Jesus. Ephrem treated the festival of Pascha in a similar manner, evoking the festal month of Nisan and using traditional spring imagery to situate the festival within the year and show its relationship to the events of Jesus' death. He did not, however, say much about specifically when and how the festival was celebrated in his community. As I show throughout this chapter, Ephrem drew upon and creatively re-articulated earlier Christian traditions regarding the chronology of the Passion and death of Jesus. He borrowed, for instance, from traditions of early Christian chronographic speculation, which he used to construct a cosmic chronology, in which other events in biblical history and the yearly cycles of the calendar point to the Passion and death of Jesus. In the latter portion of the chapter, I focus on one particularly complex *madrāšâ* dedicated to the chronology of the Passion narrative (*Cruc.* 6). In this poem, Ephrem offered a solution to an exegetical problem that also interested other Syriac Christian writers, but went beyond this to elaborate in detail the calendrical and symbolic significance of the extra "day" that occurred on the Friday of the crucifixion. This analysis sheds light on both the breadth of Ephrem's interest in the chronology issue, and the potential audience for such a complex exploration of this topic.

Taken as a whole, the chapters in this book will demonstrate that, although far from systematic in his portrayal of Jesus' suffering and death, Ephrem drew upon and developed earlier traditions to depict those events in a dynamic and creative fashion. They will also show that Ephrem's vision of the theological significance of the crucifixion was not limited to the category of "atonement," but encompassed a broad swathe of his theological imagination. In the process, I will draw Ephrem into a larger scholarly conversation on the death of Jesus in early Christianity, a discussion which has broader consequences for our understanding of early Christian thought.

As one of the earliest named Christian writers in the Syriac language, Ephrem offers an important window into Christian communities in fourth-century Mesopotamia. His vast corpus of poetry and prose works sheds light on otherwise little-known practices of literary composition and performance in Syriac in this formative period. Yet the consistent lack of clear indications of date in Ephrem's writings poses a thorny challenge for the historian. My approach in this book is to respect these limitations by not attempting to impose a chronology, while also refraining from harmonizing Ephrem's thought in a systematic theological study. In so doing, I hope to provide a model of how to engage in historical analysis of early Christian writings that cannot be easily contextualized.

Ephrem's Biblical Imagination

1   Introduction: "Sheol Vomited and Spat out the Dead"

> [*Cruc.* 4.14] And the sun, the lamp of humankind, obscured itself.
> It took and spread across its face a veil of darkness
> so that it would not see the disgrace of the sun of righteousness,
> in whose light shine the watchers above.
> Creation reeled and heaven doubled over;
> Sheol vomited and spat out the dead.[1]

This stanza—from the one of the poems in Ephrem's small *madrāšê* collection entitled *On the Crucifixion*—retells particular episodes of the gospel Passion narratives to dramatic effect. The larger pattern of this poem is to recount the events of the Passion and death of Jesus and show their deeper significance for Christian theology and identity. Ephrem makes the darkness that fell over the land on the afternoon of the crucifixion into an expression of the shame of the personified sun on behalf of Jesus, "the sun of righteousness." Similarly, he transforms the earthquake at Jesus' death into a moment of profound physical distress for the entire created order: earth, heaven, and the grave (Sheol), which "vomits" up the dead it held.

This last event may give us pause: where do the biblical crucifixion narratives mention Sheol opening up to release the dead? The answer to this question can be found in the primary gospel text known to Ephrem—the Syriac Diatessaron—and specifically its version of the raising of the dead at Jesus' death (Matt 27:52–53). This passage, widely seen today as an idiosyncratic oddity of Matthew's Passion account, is in fact central to so much of Ephrem's vision of the significance of Jesus' crucifixion.[2] It is, in my estimation, the most-

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1   ܐܘ ܗܘ ܕܨܗ̇ܐ ... (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 58). Cf. *Comm. Diat.* XXI.5: "Created beings suffered with [him] in his suffering. The sun hid its face so as not to see him when he was crucified. It retracted its light back into itself so as to die with him." (ed. Leloir, *Version syriaque*, 210; trans. McCarthy, *Commentary*, 319).

2   Significant scholarship on this passage includes: John W. Wenham, "When Were the Saints Raised? A Note on the Punctuation of Matthew xxvii. 51–53," *JTS* 32 (1981): 150–152; Donald

frequently-referenced passage from the Passion narrative in Ephrem's corpus.[3] Ephrem alludes to it far more often than even to the stories of the resurrection of Jesus![4]

How can we explain Ephrem's fixation on this passage? That will be the question I seek to address in this chapter. To properly answer it, we will need to first delve into the larger issues regarding the gospel text Ephrem knew and the interpretive traditions upon which he drew. We will also need to consider how Ephrem operated as a reader, how he cited, reused and reapplied the biblical traditions. As the stanza cited above makes clear, Ephrem did not typically engage with this story as a commentator systematically exploring the details of the passage and remarking on its meaning; rather, he used the passage as the raw material for constructing new meanings. This presupposes an imagination soaked in the language and imagery of the Bible.

Because Matt 27:52–53 (especially in its unique variant form from the Diatessaron gospel) is of such importance in Ephrem's writings, understanding the textual history of this passage will be essential to comprehending Ephrem's use of it. I will argue that the more open-ended character of the Diatessaron's variant (which speaks of those raised simply as "the dead"), allowed Ephrem to accord the Matthean narrative of the raising of the dead a central symbolic role in envisioning the defeat of death by Jesus.

Senior, "The Death of Jesus and the Resurrection of the Holy Ones (Mt. 27:52–53)," *CBQ* 38 (1976): 312–329; Ronald L. Troxel, "Matt. 27:51–54 Reconsidered: Its Role in the Passion Narrative, Meaning and Origin," *NTS* 48 (2002): 30–47; Ronald D. Witherup, "The Death of Jesus and the Raising of the Saints: Matthew 27:51–54 in Context," *SBL Semeia Studies* (1987): 574–585. Kenneth Waters summarizes the state of research on the passage as follows: "In the end … scholarly opinion leaves us with only two general options for Matt. 27:52–53, especially when the raising of the saints is understood as an event of Matthew's past. This passage is either theology composed in the guise of history or an enigma about which we can only speculate." (Kenneth L. Waters, "Matthew 27:52–53 As Apocalyptic Apostrophe: Temporal–Spatial Collapse in the Gospel of Matthew," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 3 [2003]: 489–515.) In the remainder of his article, Waters proceeds to argue that the passage is an actually an "apocalyptic apostrophe" referring to the future resurrection. He contends that such a "temporal-spatially conflated" passage is not unprecedented in the literature of Judaism and early Christianity (ibid., 489).

3   I have found references or allusions to the passage in the following passages: *SdDN* 3.2–3, 10.1, *SdF* 3.363; *Nis.* 37.5–8, 38.5, 39 (ref), 39.6, 39.9, 39.21, 58.3, 63 (ref), 65.18, 66 (ref.), 72.1; *Eccl.* 13.26–29, 41.2,4; *CH* 3.11, 40.10; *Azym.* 3.8, 3.11, 3.14, 3.19, 4.4–7, 4.14, 7.3, 20.2; *Cruc.* 4.14, 7.3, 7.6; *Res.* 3.10–11, 4.9, 4.14, 5.4; *Nat.* 4.37,164–171,191, 18.36; *Comm. Diat.* XIV.10, XXI.1, XXI.5–6, XXI.21; *Nic.* 8.17–18, 8.91–95, 8.113–120; *Abr. Qid.* 2.21; *Fid.* 63.3.

4   Ephrem's frequent use of this passage has received very little attention in scholarship. For exceptions, see Teixidor, "Le thème de la descente," 29–32; Buchan, *"Blessed Is He Who Has Brought Adam From Sheol,"* 163–165.

The latter sections of this chapter will turn to consider the place of this passage in Ephrem's theological imagination (in relation to Jesus' descent to Sheol, Jesus' status as divine and creator, and the eschatological resurrection). These sections will reveal just how central the language and imagery of Matt 27:52–53 were to the theology of Ephrem's *madrāšê*. Ephrem drew upon the events of this passage to argue for Jesus' divine status, and they shaped his portrayal of what happened when Jesus died (the descent to the underworld) and what will happen once again at the eschaton.

Finally, since Ephrem lived, thought, and wrote in a contested religious atmosphere, in the last section of this chapter I will explore the dynamics of Ephrem's conflict with Bardaisanite Christians over death and the resurrection. This analysis, which will highlight the contested nature of biblical exegesis and theology in fourth-century Mesopotamia, will offer a framework within which to consider when, how, and why Ephrem used references to Matt 27:52–53.

All of this will serve to demonstrate the complex manner in which Ephrem interacted with just two verses from the Gospel Passion narrative, as he drew upon this biblical scene and continuously re-imagined it in different contexts. The dramatic scene of the dead rising from their tombs at the moment of Jesus' death offered an ideal point of departure for Ephrem's theological imagination.

Although I will cite broadly from a number of Ephrem's writings, I will give special attention to examples in the *On Nisibis madrāšê* cycle and the Paschal *madrāšê* cycles (*On the Unleavened Bread, On the Crucifixion*, and *On the Resurrection*) in this chapter. Many of the poems in these cycles were likely performed in the liturgical context of the Paschal feast, and are oriented around themes like the Passion and death of Christ, the descent to Sheol, and the eschatological resurrection.

2   Ephrem and the Bible

2.1   *Ephrem's Biblical Vision*
What, then, was Ephrem's Bible? Our words "Bible" or "Scripture," are of course, somewhat misleading. We picture a stable, concrete entity, a book with clear canonical boundaries that we could hold in our hands. Ephrem, reflecting a world in which the "Bible" was in fact a collection of discrete manuscripts, called his scriptures the "books" (*ktābê*), and conceived of them as consisting of an "Old" (*Fid.* 56.7) and "New Testament" (*Fid.* 86.7).[5] Ephrem held to an exalted

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5   For an introduction to Ephrem's "imagined" Bible, especially over and against his subordina-

view of the Bible, imagining it, to borrow Jeffrey Wickes's words, "as a transcendent document, full of mysterious signs that stretch human comprehension."[6]

Reflecting this lofty understanding of the Bible, Ephrem drew upon a web of Syriac terms—including *rāzâ* ("symbol," "mystery"), *ṭûpsâ* ("type"), *matlâ* ("parable"), *pellêtâ* ("parable," "proverb"), *dmûtâ* ("likeness"), *ṣalmâ* ("image"), *ṣûrtâ* ("depiction"), *nîšâ* ("sign"), and *maḥzîtâ* ("mirror")—to delineate how biblical narratives, sayings, and images stand in relation to future realities, particularly Christ and the church.[7] He also used these terms to describe how biblical passages or images offer moral examples or attest to God and his nature. Many of these terms (particularly *rāzâ* and *ṭûpsâ*) have a much broader range of application: for Ephrem, divine types and symbols filled the natural world as well as the Bible, creating an inexhaustible source by which God's hidden divinity can be made known.[8] As Ephrem writes in the fourth *madrāšâ On Faith*: "Your symbols, Lord, are everywhere, / yet you are hidden from everywhere."[9] On the basis of Ephrem's juxtaposition between God's hiddenness and revelation in the Bible and nature, Brock has argued that Ephrem's symbolic theology offers a thoroughly "sacramental" vision of the world.[10] Likewise, Wickes persuasively contends that these metaphorical signs in the Bible, especially the divine names, inform Ephrem's own poetic freedom to recast biblical language and narratives in new and different ways.[11]

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tionist opponents in the *Hymns on Faith*, see Jeffrey Wickes, *Bible and Poetry in Late Antique Mesopotamia: Ephrem's* Hymns on Faith, Christianity in Late Antiquity 5 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), chapter 3. While I find Wickes's analysis persuasive overall, his focus is on a single collection of Ephrem's *madrāšê*, while my focus here is more comprehensive.

6   Wickes, *Bible and Poetry*, 53.

7   Tanios Bou Mansour draws clear distinctions between tthese terms, arguing that they each of describe a different modes of representation and symbolization. Most scholars have not accepted Bou Mansour's argument, as Ephrem tends to use many of these terms largely synonymously. Nevertheless, I appreciate Bou Mansour's emphasis on considering each term individually. ("Étude de la terminologie symbolique chez saint Éphrem," *Parole de l'Orient* 14 [1987]: 221–262).

8   See Sidney H. Griffith, *"Faith Adoring the Mystery": Reading the Bible with St. Ephraem the Syrian* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1997), 26–32. See *Virg* 9, 10, 20.12; *Azym.* 4.22–24.

9   *Fid.* 4.9 (ed. Beck, *HdF*, 12; trans. Wickes, *Hymns on Faith*, 75).

10 Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 56. See also Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 157.

11 Wickes, *Bible and Poetry*, 56–62. For more on Ephrem's biblical hermeneutics, see Nabil El-Khoury, "Hermeneutics in the Works of Ephraim the Syrian," in *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984: Literary Genres in Syriac Literature*, OCA (Rome: Pontifical Institutum Studiorum

Understanding Ephrem's use of the Bible is essential to understanding Ephrem: citations, allusions, and references to its narratives, language, and characters pervade his writings. The books of the Bible are, in fact, the only extant Syriac sources we can be certain that Ephrem read (beyond a single possible reference to the *Odes of Solomon*).[12] For this reason, it is all the more important to consider the role of the Bible not just in Ephrem's formal biblical commentaries, but throughout his wide-ranging corpus, particularly his vast array of poetic *madrāšê* and *mêmrê*.

2.2   *Ephrem's Gospel*

In order to explain Ephrem's particular interest in the raising of the dead in Matt 27:52–53, we must turn our attention specifically to the Gospels as they were known to Ephrem in fourth-century Roman Mesopotamia. What version of the Gospels did Ephrem know and use? Ephrem's main source would have been the Syriac gospel revision of the four gospels, the so-called *Diatessaron* attributed to Tatian.[13] The Diatessaron was likely the first gospel text known in the Syriac-speaking world, and it remained preeminent in Christian liturgy and literature before it was finally supplanted by the fourfold gospels around the turn of the fifth century. Indeed, as Matthew Crawford has pointed out, while modern scholars frame the Diatessaron as a gospel "harmony" because we are accustomed to four canonical gospels, for Ephrem and other Syriac Christians raised on its words, the Diatessaron was simply known as "the gospel."[14]

Because no copies of the Syriac Diatessaron survive, scholars of New Testament textual traditions have been particularly interested in Ephrem's quotations from and allusions to it.[15] Although Ephrem's primary "gospel" text was

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Orientalium, 1987); Pierre Yousif, "Exegetical Principles of St. Ephraem of Nisibis", *Studia Patristica* 18, no. 4 (1990): 296–302; Griffith, *"Faith Adoring the Mystery"*.

12   In *Par.* 7.21, Ephrem uses language identical to *Ode* 11—"nothing in it is idle". On this issue, see Murray, *Symbols*, 255. In addition, *Comm. Diat.* XVI.25 may draw upon Aphrahat, *Dem.* 23.9 (or perhaps some earlier common source). Despite this paucity of external reference, we can be sure that Ephrem drew upon certain Syriac literary and theological conventions in composing his writings, though direct evidence for most of these has been lost to history.

13   Matthew R. Crawford, "Diatessaron, a Misnomer? The Evidence of Ephrem's Commentary," *Early Christianity* 4 (2013): 362–385.

14   Matthew R. Crawford, "Reading the Diatessaron with Ephrem: The Word and the Light, the Voice and the Star," *vc* 69, no. 1 (2015): 70–71.

15   F.C. Burkitt, S. Ephraim's Quotations from the Gospel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1901); Arthur Vööbus, *Early Versions of the New Testament: Manuscript Studies*, Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile 6 (Stockholm: ETSE, 1954), 92–97; Matthew Black, "The Syriac Versional Tradition," in K. Aland, ed., *Die alten Übersetzungen*

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clearly the Diatessaron, he was also familiar with four "separated Gospels," as we will see in the case of Matt 27:52–53.[16] Ephrem's knowledge of the gospel traditions was not limited to extant written texts; he referred to several otherwise unknown apocryphal stories associated with the gospel traditions, as I will discuss in chapter 4.

2.3   *Ephrem's Context as a Reader of the Bible*

Ephrem inhabited a Syriac Christian intellectual milieu which, despite its theological and sectarian diversity, bears the markers of common reading practices and interpretive traditions. For example, Ephrem's use of the language of Matt 27:52–53 is strikingly reminiscent of examples found in Aphrahat's *Demonstrations* and the Syriac *Acts of Thomas*.[17] That being said, we possess only scattered hints of the Syriac Christian tradition prior to Ephrem, making it is very difficult to situate Ephrem's intellectual activities as a reader of the Bible (and specifically the Diatessaron gospel) in a broader context.

Although we know of a number of parallels between Ephrem and contemporary Jewish exegetical traditions, it is difficult to say with confidence what those similarities reveal about the social realities of contact between Jews and Christians in Syria and northern Mesopotamia.[18] Yet it is certainly true that Ephrem drew upon the Bible in a contested and fractured religious landscape, in which other religious groups also used the same texts and stories as authorities. Ephrem's use of the Bible, therefore, often has a polemical edge, as we can

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des Neuen Testaments, die alten Übersetzungen des Neuen Testaments, die Kirchenväterzitate und Lektionare, ed. Kurt Aland (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1972), 120–159; Lange, *Portrayal of Christ*; Sebastian P. Brock, "The Use of the Syriac Fathers for New Testament Textual Criticism," in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis*, ed. Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2014).

16   On the question of Ephrem's knowledge of the "separated gospels," see Crawford, "The Fourfold Gospel."

17   See below, section 2.3.2.

18   See Sebastian P. Brock, "Jewish Traditions in Syriac Sources," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 30, no. 2 (1979): 212–232; Paul Féghali, "Influence des targums sur la pensée exégétique d'Ephrem," in *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984: Literary Genres in Syriac Literature*, OCA 229 (Rome: Pontifical Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1987), 71–82; Tryggve Kronholm, *Motifs From Genesis 1–11 in the Genuine Hymns of Ephrem the Syrian with Particular Reference to the Influence of Jewish Exegetical Tradition* (Lund: Liber Läromedel/Gleerup, 1978); N. Sed, "Les hymnes sur le paradis de saint Ephrem et les traditions juives," *Le Muséon* 81 (1968): 455–501. Most recently, see Yifat Monnickendam, *Jewish Law and Early Christian Identity: Betrothal, Marriage, and Infidelity in the Writings of Ephrem the Syrian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); idem, "The Kiss and the Earnest."

see, for example, in the refutation of Bardaisanite and Manichaean cosmologies implicit in his interpretation of Genesis 1.[19]

Unfortunately, the path toward a deeper understanding of Ephrem's context as a reader of the Bible is littered with challenges. First, we possess no clear evidence of specialized rhetorical training in the Syriac language in the fourth century. Scholars have been able to situate Greek and Latin Christian exegetical terminology (such as *allēgoria* or *historia*) and techniques within the context of Hellenistic rhetorical education and the interpretation of the Greek classics.[20] Given Ephrem's poetic and rhetorical skill, we can be certain that some sort of formal Syriac grammatical and rhetorical training would have informed the conventions he drew upon to read and interpret biblical texts.[21] However, without evidence of this pedagogy, we simply cannot contextualize early Syriac biblical exegesis as is possible for Greek and Latin exegesis.[22]

A second, related, challenge concerns how we bring Ephrem's use of the Bible into dialogue with other Christian exegetical traditions of Late Antiquity. The word "exegesis" is itself not entirely adequate to describe Ephrem's work; it derives from the Hellenistic philological exercise of *exēgētikon*, which involved literary and historical analysis of a text.[23] Ancient exegetes (both of the Greek classics and the Christian scriptures) drew upon a wide range of scholarly techniques to answer questions of historicity, explain puzzling terminology, and interpret difficult passages.[24] Ephrem's methods are at times similar to those common to the practice of *exēgētikon*, but it is unlikely that

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19   Taeke Jansma, "Ephraems Beschreibung des ersten Tages der Schöpfung," *OCP* 37 (1971): 295–316.

20   See Robert M. Grant, *The Letter and the Spirit* (London: S.P.C.K., 1957); Christoph Schäublin, *Untersuchungen zu Methode und Herkunft der Antiochenischen Exegese* (Köln: Hanstein, 1974); Young, *Biblical Exegesis*.

21   See Possekel, *Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts*, 48–54, for an impressive summary of what we can say with confidence about Ephrem's education.

22   According to Adam Becker's exhaustive study of the Syriac scholastic traditions of Late Antiquity, the earliest clear evidence for formal education in Syriac comes from the fifth century. (Adam H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and Christian Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006]).

23   For a helpful orientation to the subject of ancient philology, particularly as it is relevant to Origen, the early Christian philologist *par excellence*, see Peter W. Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), chapter 3. Martens consciously builds upon the work of Neuschäfer's *Origenes als Philologe*. The most significant ancient source for the philological discipline is Dionysius Thrax's Τέχνη γραμματική (G. Uhlig, ed. *Dionysii Thracis: Ars Grammatica*, Grammatici Graeci 1.1 [Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1883: repr., Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1965]).

24   See Martens, *Origen and Scripture*, 49–63.

such similarities stem from a formal education in a Greek grammatical school. This is why it is problematic to map Ephrem onto the divide between "Antiochene" and "Alexandrian" exegesis, as some scholars have done.[25] As Lucas Van Rompay has argued, Ephrem's commentaries are strikingly different from, for example, those of the "Antiochene" Theodore of Mopsuestia, as they lack the philological interests that animated Theodore's work.[26] Ephrem did not share the pedagogical foundation of *paideia* that undergirded the methods of both the Antiochene and Alexandrian exegetes.

Indeed, Ephrem's use of the Bible was more expansive than just quoting a text and explaining its meaning (which is how *exegesis* is usually understood in the common parlance of modern scholarship). Ephrem certainly sometimes engaged in this sort of activity; like his Greek- and Latin-speaking counterparts, he composed works singly devoted to the interpretation of a single biblical book (his commentaries on Genesis, Exodus, and the Diatessaron gospel are extant).[27] Beyond his commentaries, too, he occasionally took time to explain the meaning of particular biblical passages.[28] However, his use of the Bible was far more expansive than this. Ephrem wove allusions and references to biblical phrases, narratives, characters into nearly everything he wrote. Because biblical sources were so integral to his writing, I have generally opted for *use of the Bible* as a more comprehensive alternative to *exegesis*.[29]

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25   See, e.g., El-Khoury, "Hermeneutics in the Works of Ephraim the Syrian," 95–96; Kronholm, *Motifs from Genesis 1–11*, 25–27; Sten Hidal, *Interpretatio Syriaca: die Kommentare des Heiligen Ephräm des Syrers zu Genesis und Exodus mit besondere[r] Berücksichtigung ihrer auslegungsgeschichtlichen Stellung*, trans. Christiane Boehncke Sjöberg, Coniectanea biblica. Old Testament series 6 (Lund: Gleerup, 1974), 25.

26   The use of terms like "history" and "literal reading" can lead the modern reader to misunderstand the actual goals of "Antiochene" exegetes such as Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia, who were grounded in the concerns of Hellenistic philology. (Lucas Van Rompay, "Antiochene Biblical Interpretation: Greek and Syriac," in *The Book of Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Judith Frishman and Lucas Van Rompay [Leuven: Peeters, 1997], 22).

27   For Ephrem's commentaries, see Hidal, *Interpretatio Syriaca*; Thomas Kremer, *Mundus primus: die Geschichte der Welt und des Menschen von Adam bis Noach im Genesiskommentar Ephräms des Syrers*, CSCO Subsidia, 641, t. 128 (Leuven: Peeters, 2012); Louis Leloir, ed., *Saint Ephrem. Commentaire de l'Évangile concordant* (version arménienne), CSCO 137 (Leuven: Peeters, 1953); idem, *Saint Ephrem: Commentaire de l'Évangile concordant. Texte syriaque (MS Chester Beatty 709)*, expanded and revised edition, Chester Beatty Monographs 8 (Leuven: Peeters, 1963).

28   See, for example, *Fid.* 6.

29   However, even "use of the Bible" can be problematic. The phrase implies a conscious employment of texts, language, and imagery. Yet, as a writer steeped in a Christian culture that was shaped by these texts, Ephrem's biblical allusions may have sometimes been

2.4   *Reading Matt 27:52–53 with Ephrem*

Having established Ephrem's Gospel text and considered Ephrem's use of the Bible in historical context, we should give more attention to how Ephrem operated as a reader. Like other early Christian writers, Ephrem's standard practice was to read and interpret biblical passages in light of one another, linking them (often without citation) through common vocabulary and shared imagery. This penchant for "cross-referencing" passages is quite similar to techniques that were standard in Greek and Latin Christian exegesis, and beyond, in the reading and writing practices of the Greco-Roman world.[30] Across the literary cultures of antiquity, writers drew upon the language of authoritative texts, recycling it and redeploying it to fit different contexts. For Ephrem, Matthew 27:52–53 was one such passage.

Generally speaking, we can divide the ways in which ancient writers made use of earlier texts into three distinct categories: explicit citation, allusion, and explicit reference. The first, explicit citation, refers to the authorial practice of introducing textual material as a source distinct from the author's own writing.[31] Because ancient citation was typically based on memory and could be subject to alteration or abbreviation, my definition emphasizes the ancient author's *presentation of* the citation, rather than the accuracy of the citation.[32]

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much more unconscious. I would like to thank Robert Morehouse for expressing this cautionary insight to me in personal correspondence.

30   See Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 130–139. Yousif therefore rightly includes "interpret the Bible with or from the Bible" among his short list of Ephrem's core "exegetical principles." (Yousif, "Exegetical Principles," 300).

31   I borrow this term from Benjamin D. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40–66*, Contraversions: Jews and Other Differences (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 21. For Ephrem, these include the Syriac quotation marker *lam* and introductory phrases such as "he said," or "it is written." See J.A. Lund, "Observations on Some Biblical Citations in Ephrem's Commentary on Genesis," *Aramaic Studies* 4, no. 2 (2006): 207–220, for consideration of Ephrem's citation technique in *the Commentary on Genesis*. Also see Lucas Van Rompay, "Between the School and the Monk's Cell: The Syriac Old Testament Commentary Tradition," in *The Peshiṭta: Its Use in Literature and Liturgy: Papers Read at the Third Peshiṭta Symposium*, ed. Bas Ter Haar Romeny, Monographs of the Peshitta Institute (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 32–33.

32   Christopher Stanley, in his study of Paul's use of Scripture, discusses the common ancient practice of reworking quotations to support the author's understanding of the earlier text. (C.D. Stanley, *Paul and the Language of Scripture*, SNTSMS 74, [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992], 338–360.) My approach is similar to that of Julie Hughes, who accounts for the quite-different expectations of modern and ancient quotation by broadening her category of "quotation" to include any point when a text shifts viewpoint or voice. (Julie Hughes, *Scriptural Allusions and Exegesis in the Hodayot* [Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2006], 43–44).

Ephrem consistently prefers allusion and explicit reference over explicit citation (even in his prose biblical commentaries). Indeed, despite the importance of Matt 27:52–53 for Ephrem, I know of no explicit citations of that passage in his writings.

The second category, allusion, is a complex form of indirect reference which functions to encourage the reader to make broader associations with the source it evokes. By the second, explicit reference, I mean a reference to or description of a text or narrative that, unlike allusion, is direct and straightfoward. Allusions or explicit references to the raising of the dead at the time of Jesus' death pervade Ephrem's publicly performed artistic prose or metrical *mêmrê* and *madrāšê*. Allusion, in fact, was Ephrem's primary literary tool when weaving together biblical language, imagery, and scenes. As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, Ephrem's usage of Matt 27:52–53 was often cloaked in allusive language, rendering it nearly unrecognizable to most modern readers. We must therefore consider the function of allusion as a literary phenomenon.

Before we examine common themes and ideas in Ephrem's allusions and references to Matt 27:52–53, we should briefly consider what we mean by these two categories. Standard definitions of allusion among literary critics emphasize that allusion is indirect or tacit.â[33] As I have already shown, many of Ephrem's allusions can be very subtle and not immediately perceptible. However, influential studies of the phenomenon of allusion (like those by Perri and Ben-Porat) have argued for a more nuanced articulation of its complexity as a form of indirect reference.[34] Such studies have shown that allusions are not necessarily "indirect" in the sense that they must be hidden or concealed, although they sometimes are. In fact, an allusion may explicitly identify the subject to which it alludes, though the reader or hearer must still understand the "tacitly specified" connotations attached to the subject.[35] The reader

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[33] According to Earl Miner, allusion is: "tacit reference to another literary work, to another art, to history, to contemporary figures, or the like." ("Allusion," in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger, Frank J. Warnke and O.B. Hardison Jr. [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965], 18.) Likewise, M.H. Abrams defines allusion as "a passing reference, without explicit identification, to a literary or historical person, place, or event, or to another literary work or passage." (*A Glossary of Literary Terms* [Boston, Mass.: Heinle and Heinle, 1999], 9.)

[34] According to Perri, "complexity of reference" is the truly distinctive feature of allusion. (Carmela Perri, "On Alluding," *Poetics* 7 [1978]: 289–307, 290).

[35] As Ziva Ben-Porat argues, "immediate identification of the source-text does not substitute for the activation of elements which remain to be identified." ("The Poetics of Literary Allusion," *PTL: A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and Theory of Literature* 1 [1978]: 105–128, 109).

or hearer "activates"[36] or "actualizes"[37] the allusion by applying the connotations from the evoked text to the alluding text.[38] Thus, as William Irwin argues, the primary purpose of allusion is to draw the reader "to make unstated associations." This, it seems, is precisely what Ephrem wanted—for his audiences to see the various parts and words of the Bible as metaphorical "signs" arranged in different ways. Since these signs point to the divine author who stands behind them, their meanings are impossible to contain or exhaust.[39] Allusion, therefore, is a means by which Ephrem can depict the limitless possibilities of the biblical revelation.

Because allusion does not require an overt marker, it does not even have to interact with a biblical passage *as* text (by using biblical vocabulary or referencing a character). Indeed, Ephrem will sometimes allude to a narrative in general terms, but recast it in metaphorical language. An example of this approach can be seen in *Virg.* 51.8, in which Ephrem reimagines the narrative of the death of Jesus in striking metaphorical terms: "Satan and Death with the serpent, their companion, / immediately desired the Blossom and choked it in their assembly."[40]

Explicit reference is a far less complex phenomenon than allusion. It is first of all *explicit*, distinguishing it from allusion. It is also a *reference*, meaning it refers to or describes a text or narrative, rather than claiming to explicitly cite the source text. Explicit references can range in complexity from brief mentions to lengthy paraphrases of narratives. While allusion relies upon the reader to grasp the connotations of the marker, explicit reference provides all the connotations necessary to apprehend the meaning.

What can we conclude from these categories? What can they reveal the place and function of the Bible in Ephrem's writings? As a rule, Ephrem rarely engages in explicit citation, even in his prose works. He often alters the text, whether for metrical reasons, stylistic purposes, or defective memory. He much more frequently references biblical accounts or characters, or alludes to biblical narratives or passages. Using the Bible is not just an intellectual, interpretive activity for Ephrem; rather, the Bible is a key component of the way he articulates—fundamental to the *grammar* of his thought. The allusive charac-

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36   Ben-Porat, "Poetics of Literary Allusion," 109.
37   Ben-Porat, "Poetics of Literary Allusion," 115.
38   William Irwin, "What Is An Allusion?" *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism* 59, no. 3 (2001): 287–297, 288.
39   See Wickes, *Bible and Poetry*, 56–59.
40   ܡܠܝܟܐ ܘܡܘܬܐ ܥܡ ܚܘܝܐ ܚܒܪܗܘܢ \ ܠܗܒܒܐ ܒܪ ܫܥܬܗ ܪܓܘ ܘܚܢܩܘܗ ܒܟܢܘܫܬܗܘܢ (ed. Beck, *HVirg.*, 164). See also *HF* 54.1, *SdDN* III.3.

ter of much of Ephrem's writing is a testament to this: biblical allusion is key to Ephrem's transmission of his thought to his audiences, situating his work firmly within a shared authoritative framework.[41] It further serves, in Ephrem's theological imagination, to draw his audiences into this nexus of divine signs. As I will show below, Ephrem uses allusions to Matt 27:52–53 in a wide variety of ways, evoking Jesus' descent to Sheol, illustrating Jesus' divine power as creator, and imagining the eschatological resurrection.

Due to the historical, cultural, and linguistic distance that separates modern scholars from the idiom of Ephrem and his audiences, it is all the more important that we have a basic understanding of his allusions and references and how to identify and activate their meanings. This is all the more important with a biblical passage like Matt 27:52–53, so often alluded to and never explicitly cited. An increased awareness of the function of allusions in Ephrem's writings can lead us to a greater understanding of how his writings might have been "heard" in their original contexts.[42]

3 Ephrem's Use of Matthew 27:52–53

3.1 *Matthew 27:52–53 in Syriac*

In order to properly understand Ephrem's use of Matt 27:52–53, we should first examine the text as it appears in the extant Syriac versions. We must remember that no manuscripts of the Syriac Diatessaron, Ephrem's primary gospel text, have survived. In fact, Ephrem's writings are the most important sources for reconstructing unique Diatessaronic variants. William Petersen, in his sweeping study of the Diatessaron, thus drew upon Ephrem, later Eastern witnesses such as Isho'dad of Merv and Romanos the Melodist, and medieval Western Diatessaronic witnesses like the *Heliand*, to argue that the text of Matt 27:52 in the Diatessaron gospel differed from the canonical Greek and Peshitta versions.[43] The Peshitta version of the verse (which is very close to the Greek) reads: "and the tombs were opened; and *many bodies of saints who slept*, arose and came forth".[44]

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41 See Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture*, 18.

42 Much as Richard Hays suggests "tuning our ears to the internal resonances of the biblical text," I believe that attention to Ephrem's allusions will perform a similar function for our understanding of the "resonances" within his writings. (*Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989], 21).

43 The standard Greek text (UBS 5th edition) reads: καὶ τὰ μνημεῖα ἀνεῴχθησαν καὶ πολλὰ σώματα τῶν κεκοιμημένων ἁγίων ἠγέρθησαν·

44 ܘܣܬܪ ܩܒܪܐ ܐܬܦܬܚܘ ܘܣܓܝܐܐ ܦܓܪܐ ܕܩܕܝܫܐ ܕܕܡܟܝܢ ܗܘܘ ܩܡܘ ܘܢܦܩܘ ܘܣܬܪ ܡܢ ܒܬܪ ܩܝܡܬܗ ܥܠ ܠܡܕܝܢܬܐ ܩܕܝܫܬܐ ܘܐܬܚܙܝܘ ܠܣܓܝܐܐ.

Drawing heavily on Ephrem for evidence, Petersen persuasively demonstrates that the Diatessaronic version of Matt 27:52 read: "and the tombs were opened and the dead (*mîtê*) were raised."[45] Because this variant is simpler and less developed with regard to the number of dead raised, their bodily status, and their identity, Petersen argues that it predated the canonical reading.[46] He further contends that both variants may have derived from an early "Christian midrash" on Jeremiah cited by Justin and Irenaeus.[47] I will not weigh in here on which reading reflects the more primitive form of the passage, but the Ephremic evidence supporting the proposed Diatessaronic variant "the dead" (*mîtê*) is even more extensive than Petersen may have realized.[48]

The raising of "the dead" (and crucially not "the bodies of the saints") at Jesus' death recurs repeatedly throughout the writings of Ephrem. Yet Ephrem was also aware of another variant corresponding to the Codex Sinaiticus Old Syriac version of the Gospel of Matthew, which identified those raised from their tombs as "the righteous" (*zaddîqê*), close to but not identical to the Peshitta text.[49] This version reads: "And the tombs were opened and many of the bodies of the righteous who were asleep rose."[50] The few examples in which Ephrem alludes to this reading offer further evidence that he had access to the "sepa-

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45   Petersen, *Tatian's Diatessaron*, 404–408. Petersen shows that major eastern and western Diatessaronic witnesses describe those raised simply as "the dead." On the basis of this observation, he hypothesizes the Diatessaronic variant.

46   Petersen, *Tatian's Diatessaron*, 412–413.

47   Petersen, *Tatian's Diatessaron*, 409–413. This so-called *Apocryphon of Jeremiah* is cited by Justin (*Dial.* 72.4) as follows: "The Lord God remembered his dead (τῶν νεκρῶν αὐτοῦ) from Israel, who lay (τῶν κεκοιμημένων) in the dust of the earth, and he descended to them to preach to them his salvation." (Ed. Goodspeed, *Die ältesten Apologeten*, 182). Irenaeus cites the same text in *Adv. Haer.* III.20.4; IV.22.1, 33.1, 33.12; V.31.1; *Dem.* 78. See also Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, trans. John A. Baker, The Development of Christian Doctrine before the Council of Nicaea 1 (Chicago: Regnery, 1964), 235–236.

48   Petersen cites only two examples from the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* (XX.30, XXI.1), and three from Ephrem's hymns (*Nat.* 4.164, *Nat.* 18.36, *Res.* 3.11).

49   On this point, Petersen argues that the reading "the righteous" (ܙܕܝܩܐ) was a "medial form," demonstrating the effects of the process of "Vulgatization" upon the original reading preserved in the Diatessaron. (Petersen, *Tatian's Diatessaron*, 413).

50   ܘܐܬܦܬܚܘ ܩܒܪܐ ܘܣܓܝܐܐ ܦܓܪܐ ܕܙܕܝܩܐ ܕܕܡܟܝܢ ܩܡ ܘܢܦܩ. A textual variant similar to this is attested in the Syriac *Book of Steps* (late fourth or early fifth century), which further quotes the gospel text as stating that the resurrected saints "were seen in the heavenly cities with our Lord" (ܘܐܬܚܙܝܘ ܒܡܕܝܢܬܐ ܫܡܝܢܬܐ ܥܡ ܡܪܢ), rather than the "holy city," as in other Syriac versions. (Memra 15.14; ed. Kmosko, 360; trans. Kitchen and Parmentier, 151). For allusions to this reading in Ephrem, see *Azym.* 3.14: "As a result of the living lamb, Death sent out / the righteous (ܙܕܝܩܐ) who came out of their tombs." (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 7). See also *Nis.* 39.4; *Comm. Diat.* XIV.10.

rated Gospels" in addition to the Diatessaron gospel.[51] Despite these few exceptions, the vast majority of allusions and references to this passage in Ephrem's writings demonstrate clear dependence upon the Diatessaron gospel.

As Petersen notes, the Diatessaron's version does not specify the number of dead raised, but simply states "the dead were raised," allowing the reader to conceive of a potentially "unrestricted" resurrection event.[52] This more open-ended narrative description may have encouraged Ephrem to interpret Matt 27:52–53 as the dramatic demonstration of the life-giving power of Jesus' death and the foretaste of the future resurrection. The central role Ephrem accords to this pericope in his portrayal of the defeat of death, then, would have its roots in his primary version of the Gospel.

The variant form of this passage in Ephrem's main Gospel version can help to explain how his use of the text differed from other early Christian authors, who mentioned the passage primarily in the context of commentaries on Matthew. Hilary of Poitiers, for instance, in his commentary on Matthew, lists the dramatic events following Jesus' death (including the raising of the "bodies of saints who slept") in rapid succession, noting how each attests to the divine victory over death.[53] And in a surviving fragment of his own commentary, Apollinaris of Laodicea stipulates that the risen "saints" would not have been seen in public until after the resurrection of Jesus, in order to demonstrate the superiority of his resurrection.[54] Other than these sorts of brief references in commentaries, I have not been able to find evidence of extensive allusion to the events of Matthew 27:52–53 in the works of other early Christian writers.

3.2 Interweaving John 5 and Matthew 27

When referencing or alluding to the events of Matt 27:52–53, Ephrem frequently mentions the "voice" (*qālâ*) of Jesus raising the dead. In the narrative of Matthew (and the Diatessaron), Jesus' cry of desolation and subsequent death are followed by a series of remarkable events: the earthquake, the tearing of the temple veil, and the raising of the dead. Ephrem, however, typically condenses the action, and makes the dying "voice" (*qālâ*) of Jesus' final cry (Matt 27:50) directly responsible for the raising of the dead.[55] In the stanza from *Azym.* 4

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51 Matthew 27 does not survive in the Curetonian Old Syriac Gospel, so it is impossible to say what reading of this passage might have appeared in that version.

52 Petersen, *Tatian's Diatessaron*, 412.

53 Jean Doignon, ed., *On Matthew*, Vol. 2, *sc* 258 (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1979), 256.

54 Joseph Reuss, ed., *Matthäus-Kommentare aus den griechischen Kirche* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1957), 51.

55 See Buchan, *"Blessed Is He,"* 163–166. There is some justification for this in the Syriac text

quoted at the beginning of this chapter, for instance, Ephrem refers to "the living voice that gave life to [Sheol's] dead."[56] In this case, only two words, "voice" (*qālâ*) and "dead" (*mîtê*) alert the reader to the presence of an allusion to the Passion narrative of Matthew 27.

Elsewhere in his writings, Ephrem associates the "voice" with the power and status of divinity. In one of the *madrāšê On Faith*, he speaks of the "voice" (*qālâ*) of the Father and Son as instrumental in the creation of all things.[57] Similarly, in the same cycle, he frequently portrays the divine "voice" (particularly at Jesus' baptism and transfiguration) as a confirmation of the Son's divine identity.[58] As this chapter will subsequently show, Ephrem drew upon the events of Matt 27:50–53 to demonstrate Jesus' identity as creator in a contested polemical context.

Ephrem's emphasis on the life-giving "voice" probably reflects the intertextual influence of the Syriac version of the eschatological discourse in John 5 (especially vv. 25 and 28), in which Jesus predicts that the "voice" (*qālâ*) of the Son will prompt the resurrection of the dead. The emphasis on the divine voice raising the dead also appears to develop an earlier Syriac tradition first attested in the *Acts of Thomas*. In that text, as part of a lengthy prayer, Thomas alludes to the crucifixion scene and the raising of the dead in terms similar to what we find in Ephrem's writings: "And you called out with your voice to the dead and they lived (*w-qrît b-qālâ l-mîtê w-ḥyaw*)."[59] Further evidence that this particular Syriac tradition preceded Ephrem appears in Aphrahat's eighth *Demonstration*, which emphasizes the "voice" of Christ as the source of life and resurrection, and even cites as support a modified form of John 5:25.[60]

Given the direct connection Aphrahat draws between the divine "voice" idea and the discourse in John 5, we should not be surprised to find evidence of this interpretive tradition elsewhere in Syriac literature of the fourth century.

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of Matt 27:51, particularly in the ᴏs (S), which begins immediately after Jesus' cry with the words "at that moment" (ܘܗܝ ܒܫܥܬܐ), followed by a description of the events of vv. 51–53 (the Peshitta reads ܘܡܚܕܐ).

56 *Azym*. 4.12: ܩܠܐ ܕܚܝܐ ܠܡܝܬܐ ܕܫܝܘܠ (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 9).

57 See *Fid*. 6, esp. 8–13.

58 See *Fid*. 46.4–7, 51.7, 54.1, 63.2–4, 65.13.

59 Ed. William Wright, *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1871), I.180.

60 "It is this voice through which the dead will live. Our savior testifies concerning it when he says, '*The hour is coming when the dead will also hear the voice of the Son of Man and come out from their tombs*.' As it is written, '*In the beginning was the voice, which is the Word*.' Again it says, '*The Word became a body and lived among us*.' It is this voice of God that will shout from on high and cause all the dead to rise up." (*Dem*. 8.15; trans. Lehto, 230).

Ephrem's allusions and references to Matt 27:52–53 closely parallel the eschatological discourse in John 5 in language and themes. The verses in question come in the midst of a speech by Jesus explaining his authority to heal on the Sabbath. The Father, Jesus says, gives all authority to the Son, even to judge and to give life to the dead. He then makes a prediction (John 5:25): "Amen, Amen, I say to you, that the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live."[61] Several verses later (5:28–29), Jesus repeats a similar saying: "But that he is the Son of man, wonder not at this; for the hour is coming when all those who are in their tombs will hear his voice and will come forth; those that have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those that have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment."[62]

The events described in these verses share much with the Diatessaronic account of the raising of the dead at Jesus' death (Matt 27:52–53): the *dead* (*mîtê*) (v. 25), or *those in the tombs* (*aylên dab-qabrê*)[63] (v. 28), hear the *voice* (*qālâ*)[64] of the Son and *come forth* (*nepqûn*).[65] John 5 (v. 25 and v. 28 [only in S]) also states that the dead who hear the voice of the Son "will live" (*neḥḥûn*). The verbal root *ḥyâ* does not appear in the extant Syriac versions of Matt 27:52–53, yet Ephrem uses it frequently when referencing or alluding to the Matthean account of the raising of the dead: Jesus' dying voice "gives life" to the dead.[66]

While this may not reflect a conscious allusion to John 5, it demonstrates a level of conceptual merger of the Matthean and Johannine passages in

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61 P: ܐܡܝܢ ܐܡܝܢ ܐܡܪ ܐܢܐ ܠܟܘܢ ܕܐܬܝܐ ܫܥܬܐ ܐܦ ܗܫܐ ܐܝܬܝܗ ܐܡܬܝ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܢܫܡܥܘܢ ܩܠܗ ܕܒܪܗ ܕܐܠܗܐ ܘܗܢܘܢ ܕܢܫܡܥܘܢ ܢܚܘܢ.

OS (C): ܕܐܬ ܐܝܬܝܗ ܫܥܬܐ ܘܐܦ ܗܫܐ ܐܝܬܝܗ ܠܗܘܢ ܐܝܪܬܘܢ ܐܡܪ ܐܡܝܢ ܐܡܝܢ ܡܝܬܐ ܢܫܡܥܘܢ ܩܠܗ ܕܒܪܗ ܕܐܠܗܐ ܘܗܢܘܢ.

Greek (UBS, 5th edition): Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι ἔρχεται ὥρα καὶ νῦν ἐστιν ὅτε οἱ νεκροὶ ἀκούσουσιν τῆς φωνῆς τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ οἱ ἀκούσαντες ζήσουσιν.

62 P: ܠܐ ܬܬܕܡܪܘܢ ܒܗܕܐ ܕܐܬܝܐ ܫܥܬܐ ܐܡܬܝ ܕܟܠܗܘܢ ܐܝܠܝܢ ܕܒܩܒܪܐ ܐܢܘܢ ܢܫܡܥܘܢ ܩܠܗ ܘܢܦܩܘܢ ܐܝܠܝܢ ܕܥܒܕܘ ܛܒܬܐ ܠܩܝܡܬܐ ܕܚܝܐ ܘܐܝܠܝܢ ܕܥܒܕܘ ܒܝܫܬܐ ܠܩܝܡܬܐ ܕܕܝܢܐ.

OS (C): ܠܐ ܐܝܪܝܢ ܗܘ ܒܪܗ ܗܘ ܕܐܢܫܐ ܗܘ ܬܬܕܡܪܘܢ ܒܗܕܐ ܕܐܬܝܐ ܐܝܪܝܢ ܟܠܗܘܢ ܗܘ ܐܝܠܝܢ ܕܒܩܒܪܐ ܐܢܘܢ ܢܫܡܥܘܢ ܩܠܗ ܕܐܠܗܐ ܘܢܦܩܘܢ ܐܝܠܝܢ ܕܥܒܕܘ ܛܒܬܐ ܠܩܝܡܬܐ ܕܚܝܐ ܗܘ ܐܝܠܝܢ ܕܥܒܕܘ ܒܝܫܬܐ ܠܩܝܡܬܐ ܕܕܝܢܐ.

Greek (UBS, 5th edition): μὴ θαυμάζετε τοῦτο, ὅτι ἔρχεται ὥρα ἐν ᾗ πάντες οἱ ἐν τοῖς μνημείοις ἀκούσουσιν τῆς φωνῆς αὐτοῦ

63 Matt 27:52: "And the tombs (ܩܒܪܐ ܐܬܦܬܚܘ) were opened ..."

64 Matt 27:50: "And Jesus called out with a loud voice (ܘܩܥܐ ܩܠܐ ܪܡܐ)."

65 Matt 27:52: "... and many bodies of saints who slept, arose and came forth (ܘܢܦܩܘ)."

66 See *Nat.* 4.164; *Azym.* 4.12, and *Res.* 3.10, among other examples.

Ephrem's thinking and in earlier Syriac Christian traditions.[67] Ephrem could easily borrow the language of one passage to describe the events of the other. The presence of both in the same Syriac gospel (the Diatessaron) may have contributed to the close intertextual relationship between the two texts. As we have already seen, the correlation of John 5 and Matthew 27 must have been present in traditions known to Aphrahat, Ephrem, and the author of the *Acts of Thomas*. Perhaps the shared language and imagery encouraged Ephrem and other Syriac writers to see Matt 27:52–53 as the partial fulfillment of Jesus' prediction in John 5. Or perhaps it reveals the extemporaneous character of Ephrem's discourse: he did not compose these poems with an open Bible in front of him, but by drawing upon the resources of his memory.

3.3   *"Life for the Dead"*

While I have demonstrated that Ephrem and other Syriac Christians drew heavily on Matthew 27:52–53, in concert with Jesus' eschatological discourse in John 5, it is important to consider why they did so. Why were they so interested in these scenes describing death and resurrection? In short, they were already predisposed to this by the texts of their Syriac biblical translations.

Although neither the verbal stem "to give life" (*ḥya*) or its equivalent noun "life" (*ḥayyê*) appear in Matthew 27:52–53, they regularly appear in conjunction with allusions or references to that passage. One of many examples appears in stanza 164 of the lengthy poem *On the Nativity* 4:

> For when upon the cross he gave life (*aḥḥî*) to the dead,
> did his body give them life or his will?[68]

Ephrem's preference for the verb *ḥyâ* here has deep roots in the language and imagery of salvation in the Syriac New Testament. While the Greek New Testament presents several words and images to describe salvation, particularly "life" (*zōē*) and "salvation" (*sōtēria*), the Syriac translations share much with the imagery and language of the Gospel of John, in which "life" or "eternal life" are the dominant metaphors for salvation.[69] As a concept, "life" in John refers both

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67   We could also imagine the linguistic and conceptual overlap occurring even earlier, with the language of John 5 influencing Tatian's composition of the Diatessaronic version of the raising of the dead at Jesus' death.

68   ܗܘ ܚܕ ܟܕ ܥܠ ܨܠܝܒܐ ܐܚܝ ܠܡܝܬܐ ܦܓܪܗ ܐܚܝ ܐܢܘܢ ܐܘ ܨܒܝܢܗ (ed. Beck, *Nat.*, 40; trans. adapted from McVey, *Hymns*, 101).

69   The verb ζάω and the noun ζωή are far more common in John than in the three Synoptic Gospels. As Paul Rainbow notes: "Of the verb "live" (ζάω), the Fourth Gospel has roughly as

to an eschatological existence—appearing in conjunction with the adjective *aiōnios* ("eternal life"/ "life of the age to come")—and a present reality which can be accessed through the Son.[70]

The earliest Syriac translators of the New Testament drew upon this Johannine language of "life" (*ḥayyê*/*ḥyâ*) not only to translate the Greek words "to live" and "life" (*zaō*/*zōē*), but usually also to render the words "to save" and "salvation" (*sōzō*/*sōtēria*).[71] In addition, the Syriac versions typically translated *sōtēr* ("Savior") as "Life-giver" (*maḥyānâ*).[72] A striking example of this translation strategy appears in the Peshitta text of Romans 1:16: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for *life* of all who believe in it."[73] The precise reasons for these linguistic choices are, of course, unknown.[74] This idiom could have its roots in pre-Christian Aramaic usage, as seen in an Old Syriac funerary inscription dated to 73 CE, which entreats the gods to bless any respectful visitor to

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many occurrences (17×) as do Matthew, Mark and Luke together (19×); of the noun "life," more than double the number (36× in John, 16× in the Synoptics)" (*Johannine Theology: The Gospel, the Epistles and the Apocalypse* [Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014], 277).

70 Typically translated in the OS and Peshitta as ܚܝܐ ܕܠܥܠܡ.

71 The Peshitta and extant Old Syriac Gospels use the noun ܚܝܐ ("life") and the verbal root ܚܝܐ ("to live") as the primary translations of σωτηρία and σῴζω respectively. Out of the 46 occurrences of the noun σωτηρία in the New Testament, the Peshitta translates 33 of these as ܚܝܐ. See Luke 1:69 (S), 1:71 (S), 1:77, 19:9; John 4:22; Acts 13:26, 13:47, 16:17; Rom 1:16, 10:1, 10:10, 11:11, 13:11; 2 Cor 1:6, 6:2, 7:10; Phil 1:19, 1:28, 2:12; 1 Thess 5:8–9; 2 Thess 2:13; 2 Tim 2:10, 3:15; Heb 1:14, 2:3, 2:10, 5:9, 6:9, 9:28, 11:7; 1 Pet 1:5, 1:9, 1:10, 2:2; Jude 1:3. (The readings of the Peshitta and extant Old Syriac versions are identical, unless otherwise indicated). Out of the 108 occurrences of the verb σῴζω, 79 are translated in the Peshitta as variants of the verbal root ܚܝܐ. This is far more common than the main alternative translations (ܚܝܐ and ܦܨܐ). See Matt 1:21, 8:25 (S), 9:22, 10:22, 14:30 (C,S), 16:25, 18:11, 19:25, 24:13, 24:22, 27:40 (S), 27:42, 27:49 (S); Mark 3:4, 5:23, 5:28, 5:34, 6:56 (S), 8:35, 10:26, 10:52, 13:13, 13:20, 15:30 (S), 15:31, 16:16 (P); Luke 6:9, 7:50, 8:12, 8:36 (C,S), 8:48, 8:50, 9:24, 9:56, 13:23, 17:19, 18:26, 18:42, 19:10, 23:35, 23:37, 23:39 (C,S); John 3:17, 5:34, 10:9, 11:12 (S), 12:27 (S), 12:47; Acts 2:47, 4:12, 11:14, 14:9, 15:1, 15:11, 16:30, 16:31, 27:20, 27:31; Rom 5:10, 8:24, 9:27, 10:9, 10:13, 11:14, 11:26; 1 Cor 1:18, 1:21, 5:5, 7:16, 9:22, 10:33, 15:2; 2 Cor 2:15; 1 Thess 2:16; 2 Thess 2:10; 1 Tim 1:15, 2:4, 2:15, 4:16; 2 Tim 1:9; Titus 3:5; Heb 5:7, 7:25; Jas 1:21, 2:14, 4:12, 5:20; 1 Pet 3:21, 4:18. (The readings of the Peshitta and extant Old Syriac versions are identical, unless otherwise indicated).

72 Luke 1:47; 2:11 (OS: S; see also *Comm. Diat.* 11.13); John 4:42; Acts 5:31; Eph 5:23; Phil 3:20; 1 Tim 1:1, 2:3, 4:10; 2 Tim 1:10; Titus 1:4, 2:10, 3:6.

73 ܠܐ ܓܝܪ ܒܗܬ ܐܢܐ ܒܗ ܒܐܘܢܓܠܝܘܢ ܡܛܠ ܕܚܝܠܐ ܗܘ ܕܐܠܗܐ ܠܚܝܐ ܕܟܠ ܕܡܗܝܡܢܝܢ ܒܗ. Compare the Greek: Οὐ γὰρ ἐπαισχύνομαι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, δύναμις γὰρ θεοῦ ἐστιν εἰς σωτηρίαν παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι, Ἰουδαίῳ τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἑλληνι (UBS 5th edition).

74 Arthur Voobus attributes these original translation choices to Tatian's Diatessaron, and speculates that the reason may have been the "Jewish-Christian" roots of early Syriac Christianity, or perhaps even an earlier non-canonical text like the "Gospel according to the Hebrews." See Vööbus, *Early Versions*, 19.

the tomb and give them *'mārâ w-ḥayyê* (meaning something like "permanence and life").[75] While this may simply imply "long life," it could also refer to the afterlife.[76]

Regardless of its origins, the prominence of "life" language in the Syriac New Testament centers a particular kind of imagery, in which to "be saved," is to "live," to rise up from death into life. Ephrem's primary imagery for the salvific drama of the Passion narrative must be understood in this context. He was immersed in the language and imagery of the Syriac Bible, and its language shaped his theological emphases, consciously or unconsciously.[77] We must consider this broader context to understand Ephrem's repeated framing of the events of Matt 27:52–53 in conjunction with "life" vocabulary. I would argue, therefore, that the abundant allusions and references to the raising of the dead at Jesus' death function as concretized metaphors for the life-giving (salvific) significance of the crucifixion.

4   The Raising of the Dead in Ephrem's Theological Imagination

Given Ephrem's deep roots in the language and imagery of the Syriac biblical sources, his frequent allusions and references to the events of Matt 27:52–53 appear more comprehensible. In what follows, I want to explore how Ephrem used the raising of the dead at Jesus' death to give expression to many different aspects of his dramatic theological imagination. The language and imagery of the dead rising to life at the moment of Jesus' death informed Ephrem's portrayal of the descent to Sheol, appeared as evidence of the divine status of Jesus as creator in polemical poetry, and shaped his portrayal of the future resurrec-

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75   See inscription Bs2 in H.J.W. Drijvers and John F. Healey, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions of Edessa and Osrhoene: Texts, Translations and Commentary*, Handbuch der Orientalistik, Erste Abteilung, Nahe und der Mittlere Osten (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 193. I could also point to the pre-Christian epigraphical convention ܗܠܟ ܣܝܪ + personal name, common in funerary inscriptions from across the Aramaic-speaking world (Palmyrene, Nabatean, Old Syriac) from the first three centuries of the common era. In his exhaustive study of the formula, Klaas Dijkstra notes that it likely has its roots in ancient Assyrian conventions. See Dijkstra, *Life and Loyalty: A Study in the Socio-Religious Culture of Syria and Mesopotamia in the Graeco-Roman Period Based on Epigraphical Evidence* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 287.

76   Drijvers and Healey opt for the former, interpreting "permanence and life" as invocation for a long life, but allow for the possibility that "eternal life" might also be in view. (*Old Syriac Inscriptions*, 196).

77   Ephrem even occasionally portrays sin as a "hidden" death, more dangerous than physical death. See *Nis.* 54.7, 54.16, 61.17–21, 67.10; *SdDN* 5.

tion. In short, Matt 27:52–53 was central to a concept of the divine defeat of death and the restoration of life (made possible by Jesus' death) that pervaded Ephrem's writings.

4.1 *The Raising of the Dead and the Descent to Sheol*

As we saw in the citation from *Cruc.* 4 at the very beginning of this chapter, the raising of the dead at Jesus' death and the descent of Jesus to Sheol are intimately connected moments in Ephrem's imagination.[78] Ephrem typically portrays the two events (Jesus' invisible journey to the realm of the dead, and the visible breaking of the tombs and raising of the dead) as occurring simultaneously in time.[79] Indeed, as he makes quite clear, the dead that rise from their tombs are specifically those that Jesus brought forth from the captivity of Sheol.[80] Due to the non-linear nature of this portrayal (at least in the metrical and artistic prose writings), Sebastian Brock describes the descent to Sheol as a moment in "sacred time," which necessitates Ephrem's "story-like and mythopoeic" theological approach.[81] Brock's insight raises further questions regarding the relationship between genre and theology in Ephrem's writings: Ephrem's most detailed engagement with the descent to Sheol occurs in publicly performed dispute and dialogue poems sung in the voice of the personified character of Death (*Nis.* 35–42). How should the performative context of these texts shape our understanding of them? I will return to this question in the next chapter.

Javier Teixidor helpfully characterizes Ephrem as uniting two earlier conceptions of Sheol: Sheol as *the grave* and Sheol as *the realm of the dead*. Ephrem's Sheol consists both of the individual tombs of dead people and the kingdom

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78 This connection may go back to the composition of Matthew's Gospel. In his lengthy treatment of the descent motif, Jean Daniélou sees Matt 27:52–53 (like *Gospel of Peter* 41–42 and the aforementioned *Apocryphon of Jeremiah*) as addressing the fate of the Old Testament saints. As such, in its original composition, according to Daniélou, Matt 27:52–53 belongs to the early phase of the development of the descent motif. (Daniélou, *Theology of Jewish Christianity*, 236). Javier Teixidor's observation that the chronology of Matt 27:52 (at the moment of Jesus' death, rather than a period of time after his death) makes it difficult to connect to the descent tradition thus seems unsubstantiated in light of the broader range of evidence from earliest Christianity. (Javier Teixidor, "Le thème de la descente aux enfers chez saint Éphrem," *L'Orient Syrien* 6 [1961]: 25–40.)

79 Cf. Buchan, *"Blessed is He,"* 151.

80 See, for example, *Nis.* 41.15, in which Death is "bewailing the dead who, at the Firstborn's voice / came to life and went out of Sheol." (ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 36).

81 Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 30. Following Brock, Thomas Buchan describes Ephrem's account of the descent as "more poetic and less temporally linear" than that given in later accounts of the descent to Sheol like the *Gospel of Nicodemus*. (Buchan, *"Blessed is He,"* 167).

of the underworld, where personified Death reigns over all the dead.[82] Because Ephrem joins these two perspectives, it makes sense that he would portray the opening of the tombs and raising of the dead as an assault on the realm of Sheol. Note how Ephrem merges the two concepts in a stanza from one of the *Hymns on the Nativity*:

> [*Nat.* 4.38] Through his death the Living One emptied Sheol.
> He tore it open and let entire throngs flee from it.[83]

Unlike the text of Matthew 27:51, which describes the *rocks* being split apart (*ṣarrî*), Ephrem speaks here of the tearing open (*ṣarrî*) of *Sheol*.[84] Perhaps with a touch of hyperbole, he depicts the raising of the dead as a massive prison break, "emptying" (*sareq*) Sheol of its captives. The blurring of the categories of Sheol-as-underworld and Sheol-as-grave is essential to Ephrem's vision of the significance of Matt 27:52–53.

   Unlike many earlier Christian attestations to the *descensus ad inferos* (which tended to emphasize Jesus' proclamation to and/or deliverance of the saints who died before his coming), Ephrem presents the descent of Jesus as a more universal quest to break the power of death and bring life to the dead.[85] Such an understanding of the descent and raising of the dead was probably rooted in the Diatessaronic version of Matt 27:52: "the dead were raised." Because Ephrem's primary biblical text did not refer to "the saints who had fallen asleep," he would have been less likely to associate the passage with the specific deliverance of the Old Testament saints. With the exception of Adam, Old Testament figures go entirely unmentioned in connection to the descent to Sheol and the raising of the dead in Ephrem's writings, in a striking contrast with other late antique versions of the descent to Sheol/Hades narrative.[86]

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82   Teixidor, "Le thème de la descente," 29. Ephrem also occasionally personifies Sheol itself as a feminine figure (see, e.g., *Nis.* 35).

83   ܣܟ ܚܝܐ ܣܚܪ ܡܚܘܡܘ ܘܟ݁ܩܘܡܢ ܠܥܒܕܐ \ ܘܢܪܘܐ ܘܪܘܩܘ ܚܢܕ ܚܢܕܐ ܓ݂ܠܘܬܟ (ed. Beck, *HNat*, 29).

84   The use of the verb ܨܪܝ is the one marker indicating that Ephrem is alluding to Matthew 27. See the brief discussion of this verb in chapter 1 (section 1.1) and in chapter 6 (6.3.1). It is not clear to me what Syriac version of the passage is in view for Ephrem here.

85   See Daniélou, *Theology of Jewish Christianity*, 234. As important early witnesses to this tradition, Daniélou cites the *Gospel of Peter* 41–42, an unnamed "Elder" mentioned by Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* IV.27.2), and an early Christian apocryphon on Jeremiah cited by Justin (*Dial.* 72.4) and Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* III.20.4; IV.22.1, 33.1, 33.12; V.31.1; *Dem.* 78). He also situates the canonical version of Matt 27:52–53 within this trajectory (Daniélou, *Theology of Jewish Christianity*, 235).

86   See the next chapter (section 3.3.1) for more on this subject.

4.2   *The Raising of the Dead and the Identity of Jesus*

In the following section, I will examine Ephrem's emphasis upon the raising of the dead as testimony to the divine identity and power of the central actor of the drama—Jesus—showing how Ephrem employed allusions and references to Matt 27:52–53 as *testimonia* intended to support polemic against Marcionites, Bardaisanites, and subordinationist "Arians." This passage, along with the other remarkable events of the Gospel Passion narrative, served to demonstrate Jesus' divine power as creator in his moment of Jesus' greatest weakness.

In Ephrem's imagination, all of the events of Jesus' Passion and death could become witnesses testifying to his mission to destroy the power of death (sometimes presented as a personified figure, or as Sheol, the realm of the dead). For instance, Ephrem portrays the piercing of Jesus' side (John 19:34) with a "lance" (*rûmḥâ*) as the removal of the "lance" guarding the entrance into the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:24), and the cross itself as a "hidden lance" (*rûmḥâ kasyâ*) against Death.[87] Yet because Ephrem, like other early Christians, viewed the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus from a thoroughly post-resurrection vantage point, he often especially gravitated toward the events of the Passion narrative which appeared to attest to Jesus' divine power, particularly the darkening of the sun,[88] the rending of the Temple veil,[89] the earthquake,[90] and, of course, the dead coming forth from their tombs.[91] Ephrem presents these as testimonies demonstrating creation's reaction to the death of its creator. In his imagination, the "loud voice" (*qālâ rabbâ*)[92] of Jesus' final agonized cry (Matt 27:50) was a triumphant call of divinity, one which shook the earth, tore the Temple curtain, and most significantly, brought life to the dead (Matt 27:52–53).

Ephrem's focus on the divine status of the crucified Jesus, demonstrated by the raising of the dead to life at Jesus' death, had a polemical edge. Indeed, in light of the contested religious atmosphere of northern Mesopotamia, it would

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87 *Cruc.* 9.2 (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 77). Cf. *Comm. Diat.* XXI.10: "I have run towards all your members, I have received all [possible] gifts from them, and, through the side pierced by a lance, I have entered into Paradise enclosed by a lance. Let us enter through the pierced side, since it was through the rib that was extracted [from Adam] that we were robbed of the promise." (Ed. Leloir, *Texte syriaque*, 214; trans. McCarthy, 322.) Cf. also *Nis.* 39.7.

88 Cf. Mark 15:33, Matt 27:45; the Diatessaron utilized the slightly longer Lukan description (Luke 23:44–45).

89 Cf. Matt 27:51, Mark 15:38, Luke 23:45.

90 Cf. Matt 27:51.

91 Cf. Matt 27:52–53.

92 Matt 27:46, 50. At v. 46, *os* reads ܩܠܐ ܪܒܐ, while *P* reads ܩܠܐ ܪܒܐ. In v. 50, however, both witnesses read ܩܠܐ ܪܒܐ.

be a mistake to separate any aspect of Ephrem's theological vision from its polemical implications and applications. Marcionite Christianity, in particular, with its dichotomy between the God of Jesus Christ (the "Stranger" [*nûkrāyâ*]) and the creator God of the Old Testament ("the Just One" [*kênâ*]), was a target of Ephrem's ire.[93] According to the Marcionite redemption narrative, in order to rescue souls from the dominion of the creator, the "Stranger" (or the Son of the Stranger) descended into the creator's realm from his higher heaven and manifested himself as Jesus Christ.[94]

Because Ephrem's Marcionite foes rejected any identification of Jesus with the creator, Ephrem's responses to Marcionism often highlight continuities between the actions of Jesus and those of the creator. In his second hymn *On Abraham Qidunaya*, Ephrem inserts a lengthy interlude challenging this aspect of Marcionite theology.[95] In these stanzas, he is keen to highlight the agreement between the Exodus and Passion narratives and to refute the Marcionite rejection of the old covenant and its God.

> [*Abr. Qid.* 2.20] The Merciful One sent his Son to come and save the Peoples,
> Just as [he saved] the People from Egypt. Creation bore witness to the Son of its Lord,
> Just as beforehand [it bore witness] to its Lord.

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93   The idea is that because the "good" or "strange" God is so utterly transcendent, he is alien to creation, and creation to him. For a thorough reconstruction of Marcion's teaching on the matter in its second-century context, see Judith M. Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 324–330.

94   Numerous examples of Ephrem's critique of Christ as the Stranger can be found particularly in the *Prose Refutations* and the *Hymns against Heresies* (esp. *CH* 34–35, 37–38; *Marc.* I, II, III, et al). According to Ephrem's account, the Marcionites posited three eternal entities: the Just God, the Good God (or "Stranger"), and the *hyle*, a pre-existent form of matter, held to be evil. Jesus was the manifestation of the Stranger. There is some debate as to whether Ephrem's account is an accurate representation of Marcion's theology as originally conceived. The idea of preexistent matter (the material for the demiurge's creation), was common enough, but it is unclear whether Marcion viewed it as an eternal "being" and associated it with evil. For these questions, see Lieu, *Marcion*, 348–354.

95   Andrew Hayes makes a strong and convincing argument that the *Hymns on Abraham Qidunaya* are a composite cycle, with the first five hymns being authentic compositions of Ephrem, and the latter ten the product of a later poet. (Hayes, *Icons of the Heavenly Merchant*, 20). This hymn belongs to the former category. Furthermore, the anti-Marcionite thrust of this particular hymn fits with a common concern in the authentic writings of Ephrem.

[2.21] The sea which grew calm bore witness. The tombs which were
    split open bore witness,
along with the heavens that were rent. Earlier and later, the sun grew
    dark.
It bore witness that both earlier and later you existed.[96]

Within the context of this poem, Ephrem levels biblical testimony in response
to the Marcionite "Stranger," whom he labels a deceitful thief (stanzas 11–14)
and a warmonger unworthy of his title "Good One" (stanzas 15–16).[97] In these
particular stanzas, Ephrem emphasizes the consistent testimony of created
things to their creator in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Exodus
account, Mt. Sinai, the Red Sea, and the victory over the Amalekites all "bore
witness" (*shed*) to the divinity (st. 19), while in the Passion narrative, the split-
open tombs and darkened sun (borrowing the language of the split tombs to
describe the heavens as "rent") similarly "bore witness" (*shed*) to the creator's
presence (st. 21). These allusions paint a coherent portrait challenging the Mar-
cionite rejection of the creator and the Old Testament, one in which Matt
27:52–53 is a critical piece of evidence.

A passage from the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* (XXI.3) draws upon
these events of the Passion narrative to critique the Marcionite understand-
ing of Jesus more directly. Although this particular passage is extant only in
the Armenian translation, it applies familiar Ephremic critiques of Marcionite
theology to question the Marcionite interpretation of events of Jesus' crucifix-
ion.[98] Ephrem focuses particularly on the darkening of the sun, arguing that the

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96 ܟܠܗ ܪܡܟܐ ܥܙܐ ܠܗܢܐ ܢܗܪܐ ܐܟܪܗ ܢܦܩܡ ܗܘܡ ܠܚܘܐ ܠܚܝܘܬܟܐ | ܘܚܘܬܗܘܬ ܟܘܟܒܐ ܥܡ ܚܝܙܡ
    ܘܪܡܘܡ ܘܐܪܬܟܐܪ ܠܟܢ ܚܙܗ | ܟܪ ܕܠܚܙܢܐ ܥܡ ܠܘܡܢܟ ܐܡܪܪ ܠܟ ܡܟܐ ܠܗ ܡܪܡ ܚܘܬܗܘܬ ܟܝܢܪ ܟܠܟܪܐ | ܪܡܘܡ ܠܗ
    ܗܠ ܡܟܒܐ ܕܝܙܡ ܗܘܡ | ܘܟܒܟܬܐ ܘܗܕܪܝܡܡ ܗܘܡ ܠܚܠ ܕܠܐ ܕܝܘܬ ܥܚܝܘܬܐ ܒܝܢ ܥܒܕܟܐ | ܗܘܡܪ ܠܗ
    ܕܝܘܬܗܘ ܠܚܠ ܐܘ ܕܝܪܐܪ (ed. Beck, *Abr. Qid.*, 6; trans. adapted from Hayes, *Icons of the
    Heavenly Merchant*, 321).

97 The depiction of Christ as both a mighty warrior and shrewd businessman seem to have
    been significant themes in Marcionite theology. See H.J.W. Drijvers, "Christ As Warrior and
    Merchant: Aspects of Marcion's Christology," *Studia Patristica* 21 (1989): 73–85.

98 The first paragraph of the section describes the nature of Jesus' suffering, explaining that
    both his body and soul (and thus his full humanity) suffered on the cross. This appears to
    reflect a more developed Christological question than we find elsewhere in the authen-
    tic writings of Ephrem (see Lange, *The Portrayal of Christ*, 131–132.) That being said, the
    second part of the passage changes tact to address the question of whether Jesus truly pos-
    sessed a physical body (and thus critique Marcionite theology), an issue more common to
    the other writings of Ephrem. In my judgment, the passage could be a composite which
    includes authentic Ephremic material on Jesus' real humanity as well as a later addition

Marcionite "Stranger" would have had no authority to bring about the fantastic events of the crucifixion scene, since "this was not part of his domain."[99] Furthermore, Ephrem says, "the Good One" (another Marcionite descriptor for the Stranger) would not have done something outside of his authority. Rather, Jesus as creator demonstrated his mercy for his crucifiers by bringing the darkness and revealing his identity. Such contested polemical terrain likely encouraged Ephrem to emphasize the divine power and agency of Jesus in the most shameful and painful moments of his humiliation. As he does elsewhere, Ephrem emphasizes Jesus' power over heavenly bodies, an emphasis which seems to have had a particular anti-Manichaean and anti-Bardaisanite valence.[100] For Ephrem, the recognition of the crucified Jesus as creator was integrally related to the life-giving power of his death. The Marcionite rejection of Jesus' status as the divine creator challenged a key tenet of Ephrem's vision of salvation, which he sought to defend through exposition of the spectacular events of the Passion narrative, especially the raising of the dead at Jesus' death.

Ephrem's unwavering emphasis on Christ's divinity and status as creator led him to render the mundane and brutal scene of the crucifixion in especially dramatic tones. In several poems from the cycle *On the Unleavened Bread* (13–16), Ephrem presents the Passion as a scene of wonder, marveling that the glorious and powerful creator God could have been nailed to a cross: "Before him Mt. Sinai melted. / How the cross bore him is a wonder!"[101] These poems are built on a pattern of repeated paradoxes: in the case of *Azym.* 15, the theme is the "weightiness" of the divine. Ephrem continually juxtaposes the Son's upholding of creation as creator with the ability of created things (like the sea of Galilee, the donkey, the cross, and Golgotha) to "bear" (*ṭ'en*) Jesus. Ephrem's frequent response to these paradoxes of the incarnation (especially in *Azym.* 13–16) is to return to a key distinction in his thinking between what is hidden/invisible (*kasyâ*) and what is revealed/visible (*gelyâ*). Although Jesus hung on the cross in his "visible body" (*pagrâ gelyâ*), nothing could contain his "invisible power" (*ḥaylâ kasyâ*).[102] Jesus' restraint of that power and willing subjection to humil-

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expounding on the nature of his human suffering, in light of later fifth-century theological developments.

99   *Comm. Diat.* XXI.3 (ed. Leloir, *Version arménienne*, 313; trans. McCarthy, *Commentary*, 318). For a similar point regarding the sun, see *Cruc.* 1.10.

100   For this issue, see Rouwhorst, *Hymnes pascales*, Vol. 1, 74.

101   ܪܟܘܡܐ ܡܡܠܐ ܠܚܕ ܡܟܡ ܐܘ ܐܗ ܐ̈ܪܗܘܪ \ ܪܒܥܘܪ ܐܘܝܠ ܠܐܟܘܪܐ ܐܪܟܘܐ̈ܪ ,ܐ̈ܪܘܡܘܡ (*Azym.* 15.18; ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 26; trans. Walters, *Unleavened Bread*, 66). For a similar hymnic expression of wonder at the crucifixion, see Romanos, *Kontakion* 20.1 (ed. Grosdidier de Matons, *Hymnes*, Vol. 2).

102   The contrast between the body (ܐܪܓܦ) and divinity of Jesus is typical of Ephrem's chris-

iation and death is a marvel to Ephrem: "They bound and led him, yet silent within him / was the power (*ḥaylâ*) that binds all creatures."[103] Within this theological framing, we can better understand the significance of the events of Matt 27:52–53 in Ephrem's imagination. They were the "visible" manifestations of the divine "invisible power" at the most paradoxical point in Jesus' life—his shameful execution.

Ephrem emphasizes a similar paradox in the fourth hymn *On the Nativity*, probably performed in a liturgical or para-liturgical context for the Nativity feast. There, Ephrem connects Jesus' two most vulnerable moments (his growth within Mary's womb and his death on the cross), in order to highlight his "invisible power" even in weakness. The raising of the dead at Jesus' death is the primary manifestation of that "power" in the crucifixion scene:

> [*Nat.* 4.162] Ineffectual as was his body in the womb,
> his power in the womb was not correspondingly ineffectual.
> [163] Nor again is it [true] that as weak as his body was on the cross,
> so weak would be his power on the cross.
> [164] For when upon the cross he gave life to the dead,
> did his body give them life or his will?
> [165] Thus although all of him was dwelling in the womb,
> his invisible will was supervising all.
> [166] For he saw that all of him was hanging on the cross
> but his power shook all creation.
> [167] For [his power] darkened the sun and shook the earth;
> it tore open the tombs, and made the dead come forth.
> [168] See, indeed, that he was entirely on the cross,
> while yet he remained entirely everywhere.[104]

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tology. It is likely rooted in the Old Syriac (C) text of John 1:14: "The Word became *a body* and sojourned among us." See Burkitt, *Saint Ephraim's Quotations From the Gospel*, 63.

103 ܟܣܝܐ ‏ܠܗ ‏ܩܥܐ ‏ܗܘܐ ‏ܚܣ ‏ܟܠ ‏ܣܠܩ ‏ܘܗ ‏ܕܚܣ ‏ܟܠ ‏ܚܬܝ‏ܐ (*Azym.* 13.5; ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 20; trans. Walters, *Unleavened Bread*, 52). Cf. Lange, *The Portrayal of Christ*, 110–111.

104 ܠܐ ‏ܟܣܝ ‏ܕܙܥܘܪ ‏ܗܘܐ ‏ܦܓܪܗ ‏ܒܥܘܒܐ ‏ܐܦ ‏ܚܝܠܗ ‏ܗܘܐ ‏ܒܚܝܠ ‏ܚܣܝܪܐ ‏ܠܐ ‏ܬܘܒ (ed. Beck, *HNat*, 40; trans. adapted from McVey, *Hymns*, 101).

In order to emphasize the divine "power" (*ḥaylâ*) and "will" (*ṣebyānâ*) of Jesus in the face of frailty, characterized by his "body" (*pagrâ*), Ephrem here once more references the spectacular events of the crucifixion narrative. When the dying Jesus raised the dead, eclipsed the sun, and caused an earthquake, these things could only have been the result of his divine power and will (since his body was hanging on a cross). To stress this point, Ephrem employs a series of causative (primarily *aphʿel*) verbs (*aḥšek, azzîʿ, sarrî, appeq*) more obviously linking the remarkable phenomena of the Passion narrative to Jesus' direct action (st. 167).

For Ephrem, these spectacular displays of power from the cross demonstrate the complete freedom of Jesus' will as the divine Son, independent from his human body, as stanza 164 of the above citation indicates. In that stanza, the raising of the dead is the ultimate example proving the action of Jesus' divine will, for only God could give life to the dead.[105] Similarly, in the twentieth hymn *On the Unleavened Bread*, Ephrem reflects upon the hands of Jesus stretched out upon the cross. "When they nailed his hands, he tore open the tombs / for his will is a free power."[106] Once more, he portrays the raising of the dead (Matt 27:52) as the visible demonstration of Jesus' divine power, which he identifies with his "will" (*ṣebyānâ*). Though Jesus' body was "nailed entirely to the cross," the power of his will remained "completely and utterly free."[107] By extension, all of the events of the Passion could only have occurred in accordance with his divine will, as Ephrem explains in *Azym*. 16:

> [*Azym*. 16.1] The Firstborn willed [it] and the small tomb enclosed him,
> for nothing that he willed could be prevented.
> [2] Concerning everything that he wills: it is not possible
> to prevent his will from whatever he wills.[108]

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105 Lange argues that in the *Mêmrê on Faith* (esp. iv.193–194), which he believes to predate these hymns, Ephrem did not attribute an independent will to the Son, but instead built his Trinitarian theology upon a union of will. He contrasts this notion with the independent will of the Son exhibited in several of the hymns I have cited, and argues that this was a development in Ephrem's theology. I am not convinced that Jesus' divine "will" in these quotations contradicts the Trinitarian union of will; rather, the emphasis upon the will seems to highlight the hidden divinity of Jesus in his greatest moment of weakness (Lange, *The Portrayal of Christ*, 113–114).

106 ܗܘ ܐܬܐ ܡܚܝܚ ܢܓܪ ܡܚܬܐ \ ܣܠܩ ܠܗܐ ܐܪܙ ܐܢܐ ܡܚܝܠܐ ܗܘ (*Azym*. 20.2; ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 37).

107 ܡܚܝܕ ܗܘܐ ܠܗܐ ܦܓܪܐ ܕܠܗ ܚܘܠܬ ܐܝܕܘܗܝ \ ܐܝܬ ܗܘܐ ܐܝܕ ܣܠܡ ܘܢ ܗܘܐ ܪܐ ܣܠܡ ܚܠܗ ܒܚܪ ܚܠ (*Azym*. 20.4; ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 37).

108 ܟܣܐܗܐ ܘܓܒ ܐܪܙܘ \ ܚܠ ܒܚ ܪܘܟܬ ܗܘܐ ܠܗܐ ܚܠ ܠ \ ܐܚܘܪܐ ܐܬܐ ܡܚܕ ܣܘܪܟܐ ܟܒ ܐܪܙܘ

Because of the Son's divinity, his death and subsequent victory were part of the divine plan. Ephrem continues: "Because he willed it, greedy Death swallowed him," and later in accordance with his will, Death "vomited him up" (st. 5).[109] This divine plan of redemption centered upon the Son's willful surrender to Death, in order to overcome Death.[110] As I have shown, for Ephrem, the raising of the dead at Jesus' death played a central role in framing the moment of Jesus' greatest weakness (the crucifixion) as a demonstration of the divine power of the creator. This, in turn, supported his polemic against Marcionites and Bardaisanites—his visible power in raising the dead was that of the creator, and could only be understood as the result of his divine, undivided will.

4.3   *The Raising of the Dead and the Future Resurrection*

For Ephrem, the raising of the dead at Jesus' death anticipates the coming reality of the future resurrection of the dead. Ephrem makes this association clear by recycling the language and imagery of Matt 27:52–53 to speak of the end-time resurrection. The eschatological discourse of John 5 shapes Ephrem's understanding of the meaning of Matt 27:52–53. In that text (John 5:25,28), Jesus describes a future event in which "the dead" in their "tombs" will hear the "voice of the Son of God" and "come forth" to life.[111] The linguistic and thematic parallels between these two passages in the Syriac Gospels amplify the eschatological resonance of Matt 27:52–53 for Ephrem. When read in tandem with John 5, the Diatessaronic version of Matt 27:52–53 reveals the coming resurrection of all the dead. As the personified character of Death admits in one of Ephrem's dialogue poems, "that voice which has split the tombs" will eventually "render [Sheol] desolate and send forth the dead within her."[112]

Elsewhere, in *madrāšê* specifically focused on death and the eschatological resurrection, Ephrem's descriptions of the future resurrection regularly echo the now-familiar language and imagery of Matt 27:52. *Nis.* 70, an alphabetic acrostic poem lamenting the "bitterness" of death, builds to a crescendo imagining when the "sleeping" dead will awaken:

ܐܪܙܐ ܗܘ ܡܟ ܐܪܒܥ ܗܡ ܡܚܣܝܢ ܗܘܦܘܬܐ \ ܗܘܩܘܦܘ ܐܒܕ ܐܟ ܐܠܟ ܕܒܝܕܪܕ ܗܘ (*Azym.* 16.1; ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 28; trans. Walters, *Unleavened Bread*, 70). Cf. *Nis.* 41.12.

109   ܐܪܒܝܕ ܠܠܐ ܐܡܠ ܐܗ ܡܠܐ \ ܟܢܚ ܐܗܘܐܪ ܡܚܠܒ ܡܗ ܐܪܒܝܕ ܪܒܚ (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 28; trans. Walters, *Unleavened Bread*, 70).

110   For more on this imagery, see the next chapter.

111   Cf. Aphrahat, *Dem.* 8.3.

112   ܗܟܚܒܕܐ ܟܢܬ ܡܟܚܡ ܗܠ ܕܢܒܚ \ ܐܬܡܚ ܪܝܢܕ ܟܠܡ ܗܘܗ (*Nis.* 37.8; ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 17). Cf. *Nis.* 36.10, 15, 17; 39.21.

[*Nis.* 70.22] There will be a sound in [all] mouths, when the tombs are
    opened.
One will play on his stringed instruments to another; glory he will give
    with his melodies.[113]

The first line of stanza 22, "when the tombs are opened" (*metpatḥên qabrê*),
echoes the initial words of Matt 27:52, "and the tombs were opened" (*w-etptaḥ
bêt qabrê*). Ephrem repeatedly makes the claim that if death is a sleep, "waking
up" is inevitable. Death leads to the promise of the future resurrection. In one
poem, Ephrem once again imagines this eschatological "awakening" by alluding
to the language of Diatessaron Passion narrative and Jesus' discourse in John
5.[114]

[*Nis.* 43.16] Sleep does not keep one forever in bed.
One who slumbers and sleeps soon awakens again.
Sheol also has not kept nor does it keep the living.
See how sleep reproves Sheol!
For morning will awaken sleepers and the voice will raise the dead.[115]

Like sleep is eventually interrupted by the arrival of morning, so it will be in
the "morning" of the resurrection. The "dead" (*mîtê*) will awaken at the sound
of the "voice" (*qālâ*).[116] Both of these words recall both Ephrem's other allusions
to the raising of the dead at the crucifixion and descriptions in other early Syr-
iac sources.[117]

    These allusions to Matt 27:52–53 show that Ephrem viewed the events of that
passage as intimately connected to the future resurrection of the dead.[118] This

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113 ܘܐܘܗܝ ܗܘܐ ܩܘܩܬܐ ܕܟܘܦܘܬܘܣܡ ܡܬܐ \ ܣܪ ܠܣܕ ܠܚܪ ܕܟܬܢܘܗܝ, ܥܘܚܣܟ ܡܘܬ ܘܩܠܘܗܝ,
     (ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 115).

114 For other examples of this metaphor, see *Nis.* 53.5, 61.28, 70.13–18.

115 ܠܐ ܢܛܪܐ ܡܢ ܡܬܘܡ ܘܥܢܐ ܕܚܬܘܡܐ \ ܚܠ ܡܢ ܕܢܡ ܘܕܡܟ ܒܬܪ ܩܠܝܠ ܡܬܥܝܪ ܬܘܒ
     \ ܐܦ ܠܐ ܢܛܪ ܫܝܘܠ ܐܘ ܢܛܪܐ ܗܝ ܠܚܝܐ \ ܗܐ ܐܝܟܢ ܠܫܝܘܠ ܡܟܣܐ ܫܢܬܐ, ܕܝܘܩܪܐ ܢܥܝܪ
     ܕܡܟܐ ܘܩܠܐ ܢܩܝܡ ܡܝܬܐ (ed.
     Beck, *Nis. II*, 44; trans. adapted from Buchan, *Blessed is He*, 189–190).

116 Cf. the refrain of *Nis.* 66: "Glory be to you, Wakeful One who came down after the sleepers,
     / and upon the Wood (ܩܝܣܐ), uttered a voice (ܩܠܐ) and woke them!" (ed. Beck, *Nis. II*,
     104).

117 In his 8th *Demonstration*, Ephrem's contemporary Aphrahat claims that "with one voice
     (ܩܠܐ) and one word," Christ "will raise up the whole body of Adam at the end" (*Demon-
     strations* 8.13; ed. Parisot, *Aphraatis*, 385).

118 Cf. *Virg.* 27.6: "The dead (ܡܝܬܐ) who came out of (ܕܢܦܩܘ ܡܢ) their tombs (ܩܒܪܝܗܘܢ)
     / will sing glory on their kitharas." (ed. Beck, *Virg.*, 101).

passage in the Diatessaron's Passion narrative provided a model to describe and envision the events of the eschaton, events which biblical texts do not narrate in much detail (especially given that Ephrem was unfamiliar with the Revelation of John).[119] As Ephrem saw it, the passages of the Passion narrative are instructive, like all other parts of the Bible, for giving signs and language to understand the past, present, and future.[120]

Throughout this section, I have shown how allusions and references to the raising of the dead at Jesus' death (Matt 27:52–53) deeply shaped Ephrem's theological imagination. The image of the dead rising to life at the death of Jesus helped to give expression to a drama of the defeat of death and the triumph of life, a drama which spanned from the story of creation to the eschatological resurrection.

5 Ephrem, the Bible, and the Resurrection of the Dead in Polemical Context

Throughout this book, I emphasize the importance of reading Ephrem's words and ideas in the context of fourth-century northern Mesopotamia. Ephrem lived and delivered his messages in a contested religious environment, and he did not make use of his Syriac Bible in a vacuum. The various Christian and Christian-inspired religious groups of northern Mesopotamia drew on versions of these sacred writings to inform their own teachings on Jesus' death, descent to Sheol, and the future resurrection of the dead.

Ephrem's emphasis on the reality of the bodily resurrection (which he often highlighted with reference to Matt 27:52–53) stood in stark contrast to the theology of his three major polemical opponents (the Marcionites, Manichaeans, and Bardaisanites), all of whom appear to have taught some form of spirit or soul resurrection.[121] In what follows, I will particularly examine the dynam-

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119   The original standard edition of the Peshitta contained only 22 books (lacking 2 Peter, 2–3 John, Jude, and the Revelation of John). See Bruce Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament: Their Origin, Transmission, and Limitations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 48.

120   He makes this connection quite explicit in *Nis.* 75. Turning to address his audience, he explains that the events of Jesus' suffering and death provide a model to give the faithful hope in their own resurrection (*Nis.* 75.20; ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 130).

121   Han Drijvers roots the Marcionite rejection of the resurrection in its overlap with Middle Platonic thought. In particular, the Marcionites taught that matter, or *hylē*, was fundamentally evil, and that the Stranger came to rescue souls from the bonds of matter and bring them into the Stranger's heaven. Bardaisan, however, strongly objected to this characterization of matter, viewing it not as evil or morally inferior, but simply incapable of eternal

ics of Ephrem's conflict with the Bardaisanite theology of death and the resurrection. As we will see, this debate was, from Ephrem's perspective, primarily a dispute about the interpretation of the Bible. Although this analysis will go beyond simply analyzing Ephrem's use of Matt 27:52–53, the contested religious atmosphere of early Christian biblical interpretation and theology will be critical to framing everything I have discussed in the chapter so far.

5.1 *Ephrem and the Bardaisanites on the Bodily Resurrection*

Bardaisan (ca. 154–222 CE) was an influential Christian teacher in the city of Edessa over a century before Ephrem's birth. Deeply influenced by the philosophical schools of the day, he taught a Christian doctrine tinged by the influences of Middle Platonism and Stoicism; the only surviving text attributable to his circle, *The Book of the Laws of Countries*, is a Platonic-style dialogue on the issue of fate.[122] A century and a half after his death, when Ephrem wrote poems and treatises against him, followers of Bardaisan (Bardaisanites) endured in Edessa and the surrounding region. Given Ephrem's fixation on refuting Bardaisan (he read and responded to at least one of the teacher's treatises, the *Domnus*), it seems that Bardaisan still exercised a strong influence among many Christians in the region.

As I have already shown, Ephrem's deep commitment to the bodily resurrection is a central theme throughout his writings, and is the focus of a number of *madrāšê*, especially those collected in the cycle *On Nisibis*.[123] In many of these poems, Ephrem marshals an array of evidence for the bodily resurrection—drawing upon the incarnation and ministry of Christ, and examples from the natural world. Ephrem frequently presents these *testimonia* of the resurrection in the form of poetic refutations of "false teachers."[124] One such poem (*Nis.* 46) characterizes Ephrem's "heretical" opponents, particularly Bardaisan, as "blind" to the provision and healing of humanity through the gifts of Christ:

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life and union with God (this was a matter of the soul, not the body). See Drijvers, "Marcionism in Syria," 167–170. For more on Bardaisan's theology of the resurrection, see the summary of Possekel. ("Expectations of the End in Early Syriac Christianity," *Hugoye* 11, no. 1 [2011]: 63–94).

122　See Sebastian P. Brock, "Bardaiṣan," in *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage: Electronic Edition*, edited by Sebastian P. Brock, Aaron M. Butts, George A. Kiraz and Lucas Van Rompay (Gorgias Press, 2011; online ed. Beth Mardutho, 2018), https://gedsh .bethmardutho.org/Bardaisan.

123　See *Nis.* 43–51, 62, 65–66, 68–77.

124　See *Nis.* 45–47, 51.

[*Nis.* 46.8] Now if our Lord's concern convinces us
that he has completely healed humanity in every way,
baptized it in the Holy Spirit, nourished it with the medicine of life,
how hateful, therefore, are Mani and Marcion
and blind Bardaisan, who read but do not perceive
that the whole image of humanity will be restored at the resurrec-
tion?[125]

Ephrem's reference to the resurrection of the "whole image of humanity" chal-
lenges the idea that the future resurrection would be purely spiritual, or a resur-
rection of souls, a teaching which he elsewhere attributes to Bardaisan.[126] For
Ephrem, by contrast, the "whole image of humanity" includes the body, which
is baptized and fed with the eucharistic "medicine of life" (*sām ḥayyê*).

In his metrical *Mêmrâ Against Bardaisan*, a lengthy polemical poem dedi-
cated to attacking Bardaisanite thought, Ephrem attempts to refute the philoso-
pher's "diseased" view of the resurrection in greater detail.[127] By mirror-reading
Ephrem's polemic, we can unpack elements of Bardaisan's theology and exege-
sis as they relate to the topic at hand. According to Ephrem, Bardaisan raised
the question of the sin of Adam in order to dispute the idea of the bodily
resurrection. Since Adam did not immediately experience the promised pun-
ishment of "death" after eating the fruit in the garden, would that not imply that
the penalty was a "death" of the soul rather than a bodily death? Ephrem fur-
ther cites Bardaisan as questioning why, if Christ had intended to bring about a
physical resurrection, he had not done so at the time of his own resurrection.[128]
Surprisingly, Ephrem gives no indication of any reference to Matt 27:52–53 on
the part of Bardaisan. This absence suggests that Bardaisan apparently did not
view the raising of the "dead" at Jesus' death as the resurrection of *bodies*, but
likely interpreted the event as a resurrection of souls from Sheol, in keeping
with Ephrem's descriptions of his view of the eschatological resurrection.

In response, Ephrem echoes 1 Cor 15:21: just as Adam's sin did not lead to
his immediate death, so also Jesus' resurrection did not immediately raise all

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125 ܟܐ ܕܝܢ ܬܠܦܠܦܝܢ ܕܪܢܐ ܕܚܢܝ ܡܟܣܝܢ ܠܝ ܀ ܕܐܣܝܗܝ ܠܟܠܢܫ ܠܥܠܐ ܚܡܠ ܚܕܝܪ ܀ ܐܥܡܕܗ
ܟܝܢܐ ܩܘܕܫܐ ܐܩܪܒܝܢ ܣܡܡ ܢܟ ܀ ܚܕܟܐ ܕܪ ܗܢܐ ܗܟܢܐ ܘܗܪܘܣܝܢ ܘܚܘܪܐ ܕܪ ܕܝܢܝ (ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 55).
126 See Possekel, "Expectations of the End," 68–70. On this specific Bardaisanite doctrine,
Ephrem is our most detailed source, so it is always possible that Ephrem misconstrues
or misunderstands the historical teaching of Bardaisan, as Ilaria Ramelli argues. (Ilaria
L.E. Ramelli, *Bardaisan of Edessa: A Reassessment of the Evidence and a New Interpreta-
tion*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies [Piscataway, N.J: Gorgias Press, 2009], 217–231.)
127 *Bard.* I (Syr. 143).
128 *Bard.* LXXIV.

the dead. Instead, both death and resurrection gradually came into the world through these two representatives.[129] Curiously, Ephrem does not mention the raising of the dead at Jesus' death as a counterpoint.

Bardaisan apparently saw both the problem and solution differently. While he also believed that Adam's sin had affected his descendants, Bardaisan claimed that it resulted in a *soul death*, a "hindrance" (*kelyānâ*) to souls which sought to cross over into the Kingdom after their death. In Bardaisan's view, Jesus' promise that those who kept his word "would not taste death forever"[130] meant that their souls would not be "hindered" (*klâ*) at the "crossing place" (*ma'bartâ*), on account of Adam's sin, but would pass over into the "Bridal Chamber of Light" (*gnûn nûhrâ*).[131]

The resurrection of the soul to cross over into that Bridal Chamber, was, according to Bardaisan, the "life" that Jesus brought to believers. From Bardaisan's perspective, which we should frame within the context of second-century Platonizing cosmologies, it was absurd to imagine that corruptible matter could become eternal and incorruptible—such a concept was defitionally impossible. While narrating this viewpoint, Ephrem interjects the Syriac particle *lam*, presumably to introduce a quotation from Bardaisan:

> "And the life," [he says], "that our Lord introduced
> is that he taught truth and ascended,
> and brought them across to the Kingdom."[132]

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129   *Bard.* LXXV–LXXVI. Cf. *Comm. Diat.* IV.15. Cf. Teixidor, "Le thème de la descente," 34. While it is problematic to describe Ephrem's conception of Adam as a "corporate personality," as Murray does, for Ephrem, Adam *represents* the entire human race by virtue of his role as ancestor and physical source of the whole of humanity. Ephrem describes Adam as "that fountain / from whom all nations flowed," (*Nis.* 35.9 [ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 4]) and the one "in whom all the dead are buried" (*Nis.* 36.17 [ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 14]). For descriptions of Adam as a "corporate personality," see Murray, *Symbols*, 83. Murray's perspective is echoed by others: Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 30–31; Buchan, "*Blessed Is He*," 112–114. But compare John Rogerson's critique of H. Wheeler Robinson's notion of Hebrew "corporate personality." (John W. Rogerson, "The Hebrew Conception of Corporate Personality: A Re-Examination", *JTS* 21, no. 1 [1970]: 1–16).

130   John 8:51; *Bard.* LXXX.

131   Ephrem similarly depicts the eschatological communion between Christ and the Church as a "bridal chamber" (ܓܢܘܢܐ). See *Virg.* 24.5, 33.4; *Ieiun.* 5.1; Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 115–130. As Nicola Denzey notes, an almost identical "bridal chamber of light" concept appears also in Valentinian Christian texts discovered at Nag Hammadi. See Denzey, "Bardaisan of Edessa," in *A Companion to Second-Century Christian "Heretics,"* ed. Antti Marjanen and Petri Luomanen (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 174.

132   ܘܚܝܐ ܠܡ ܕܐܥܠ ܡܪܢ ܕܐܠܦ ܩܘܫܬܐ ܘܣܠܩ ܘܐܥܒܪ ܐܢܘܢ ܠܡܠܟܘܬܐ (*Bard.* LXXVII [Syr. 164–165]). As Ute Possekel points out, Bardaisan shares this image of the

The key distinction between the views of Ephrem and Bardaisan center upon the nature of that "life." This passage is one of the only references to Bardaisan's teaching on redemption or salvation in the surviving sources, so it is of great importance. It highlights the "ethical" focus of Bardaisan's theology, with its focus on adherence to Christ's teaching of "truth."[133] This debate over the features of salvific "life" reflects the prominence of "life" imagery in the Syriac biblical tradition, as discussed above, imagery utilized (though in different ways) by both Bardaisan and Ephrem.

Like Bardaisan, Ephrem imagines a kind of chasm across which a person "passed" or "crossed over" into Paradise or the Kingdom: "Blessed is he who put on Adam and leapt across, on the wood, into Paradise!"[134] Here and in several other places, Ephrem envisions the "wood" of the cross itself as a vehicle or a bridge spanning the post-mortem divide.[135] The difference between Ephrem and Bardaisan lies in the connection between the physical body of Jesus and the physical resurrection bodies in the future. Ephrem speaks of the Son "putting on (*lbeš*) Adam," or elsewhere, the "body of Adam."[136] He saw Adam, as the ancestor of humanity ("that fountain from whom all nations flowed") as the ultimate source of the human body for all his descendants.[137] For Ephrem, then, for Christ to "put on Adam," was to take on a human body derived (in its origins) from Adam's body. The incarnation of the Son makes the nature of salvific "life" inescapably physical for Ephrem. The resurrection of Jesus' body (or "the body of Adam") serves as a "pledge" (*rahbûnâ*) of the future resurrection of all bodies, through which the rest of the world will "live."[138]

"crossing" into eternal life with the *Odes of Solomon* 39. (Possekel, "Expectations of the End," 81–83).

133   For this insight into Bardaisan's theology, see Ute Possekel, "Bardaisan of Edessa on the Resurrection: Early Syriac Eschatology in its Religious-Historical Context," *OrChr* 88 (2004): 1–28, 27.

134   ܚܘܒܐ ܗܘ ܕܠܒܫ ܠܐܕܡ ܘܒܩܝܣܐ ܫܘܪ ܠܓܘ ܦܪܕܝܣܐ (*Ieiun.* 2.4; ed. Beck, *Ieiun.*, 6).

135   Cf. *SdN* 4: "This is the Son of the skillful carpenter who set up his cross over all-consuming Sheol and conducted humanity over to the place of life … Praise to you who suspended your cross over death so that souls could pass over on it from the place of the dead to the place of life." (ed. Beck, *SdN*, 4; trans. Amar and Mathews, 280). Cf. also *Cruc.* 9.1; *Virg.* 8.1; *Eccl.* 49.8.

136   See *SdN* 9.1, *Cruc.* 5.11. Cf. Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 31.

137   For this expression, see *Nis.* 35.9 [ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 4. Similarly, see Death's monologue in *Nis* 36.17: "In [Adam] all the dead are buried, just as when I received him / all the living were hidden in him." (ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 14).

138   *Bard.* LXXVI (Syr. 163). Cf. *Nis.* 36.17.

5.2 The Absence of the Raising of the Dead in Ephrem's Anti-Bardaisanite Polemic

Throughout this detailed refutation of the Bardaisanite view of the future resurrection, it is surprising that Ephrem did not cite the raising of the dead at Jesus' death (with one possible exception).[139] This is especially notable since their debate focused on the nature of the "life" Christ brought to humanity, and since Ephrem records Bardaisan as questioning why Jesus did not immediately raise the dead at the time of his crucifixion. Thus, the absence of this biblical reference (nearly ubiquitous in Ephrem's writings, as I have shown) is puzzling. Yet Ephrem did not use Matt 27:52–53 as a polemical resource in any of his anti-heretical discourses (collectively labelled the *Prose Refutations* by modern scholars). Although this discrepancy between the polemical encounter with Bardaisan and Ephrem's other metrical writings complicates the argument of this chapter, it provides additional evidence for the larger contention of this study. Ephrem drew upon the biblical sources differently in different contexts.

While that is clearly the case, the question still remains: why did Ephrem neglect to reference the raising of the dead at Jesus' death as evidence for the bodily resurrection in the context of his polemic against Bardaisan? One answer, suggested by Ute Possekel, could be that the Diatessaron's reading of Matt 27:52—"the dead were raised"—was general enough that it could not exclude Bardaisan's view of the resurrection of the *souls* of the dead.[140] By contrast, the Peshitta and other Syriac versions specifically note that "bodies" (*pagrê*) were raised, a variant that may have taken hold specifically to refute Bardaisanite and similar interpretations of the passage. Yet in the Gospel used—presumably—by both Ephrem and his Bardaisanite opponents, the text of Matt 27:52–53 provided no basis to refute the Bardaisanite reading. For this reason, it could serve no polemical purpose to dispute Bardaisan.

Another answer to explain the surprising absence of Matt 27:52–53 in Ephrem's polemic against Bardaisan could relate to the performative venue and audience. In his polemic against the Bardaisanite view of the resurrection, Ephrem addressed particular detailed theological questions raised in debate, suggesting that these texts were meant for a more limited and highly educated circle of pro-Nicene Christians. By contrast, in other, likely liturgically performed, *mêmrê* and *madrāšê*, Ephrem addressed a broader audience, with a wider goal. In those writings, he sought to shape a unified vision of the bib-

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139   See *Bard.* LXXI. Unfortunately this stanza is fragmentary, but Ephrem seems to speak of the Second Adam's descent to Sheol "bringing up" those who were dead through a "voice." The reference may also simply refer to the future resurrection.

140   Possekel, "Bardaisan of Edessa on the Resurrection," 10.

lical narrative, a drama of the defeat of death "performed" in the raising of the dead at Jesus' death. Matt 27:52–53 *never* appears in these texts as a proof-text for the resurrection, but always as an illustration of the salvific power of Jesus' death to give life and overcome death. Because Ephrem did not cite the passage as a polemical resource elsewhere, it seems unsurprising that he did not do so in his polemic against the Bardaisanite account of the resurrection.

6 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have demonstrated the centrality of the raising of the dead at Jesus' death (Matt 27:52–53) for Ephrem. I first sought to ground Ephrem's Bible, his gospel text, and his context as a reader of the Bible within the Syriac Christian tradition in fourth-century northern Mesopotamia. Ephrem did not typically engage with this story from the crucifixion narrative in order to comment on the meaning of the text. He drew upon a unique variant reading from his primary gospel text, the Diatessaron, to imagine the raising of the "dead" in general as a universal event, representing in a concrete, narrative form, Jesus' status as the giver of salvific "life." Through repeated allusions and references, Ephrem wove these Syriac textual and interpretive traditions surrounding Matt 27:52–53 into new contexts. Especially in his poetic *madrâšê*, the raising of the dead at Jesus' death served as a demonstration of the power of Jesus over death and Sheol, an attestation to his identity as creator, and a reference point for the eschatological resurrection of the dead.

I have also emphasized that Ephrem thought, wrote, and performed on a contested historical terrain. Marcionite Christians offered a rival narrative of salvation through the death of Jesus the son of the Stranger, which Ephrem sought to counter in his poems through highlighting the raising of the dead at Jesus' death and the other miraculous events that he took as signs of Jesus' status as creator. Meanwhile, the followers of Bardaisan envisioned the salvation brought by Jesus, and the form of the resurrection, in a manner distinctly different from Ephrem's theology. Ephrem attempted to discredit these views by emphasizing the bodily resurrection, though his polemic was surprisingly lacking in allusions or references to the raising of the dead at Jesus' death. This absence makes sense, however, because Ephrem always used Matt 27:52–53 elsewhere to illustrate the power of Jesus' death to give life and overcome death, and never as a proof-text for the resurrection.

Dramatizing the Defeat of Death: Personification and Performance

1   Introduction

As early as the letters of Paul, Christian sources described the death of Jesus as an event of universal significance, a paradoxical victory over powerful cosmic forces. Yet early Christian writers puzzled over what happened when Jesus died and was in the grave. Traditions developed which imagined the death of Jesus as a defeat of death and Satan, expanding upon the details of the Gospel narratives by filling in gaps about Jesus' descent to the dead. By Ephrem's time, these traditions were well established.

The confrontation between Jesus and Death personified was integral to how Ephrem imagined the significance of Jesus' death on the cross. Jesus used his mortal body to draw the greedy, hungry, overconfident Death into its own defeat, leading to Jesus' escape from the grave and the destruction of Death's power. But Ephrem's personified Death was not only unthinking and bestial; rather, in many poems, Ephrem made Death the narrator of the events leading to and following his own defeat. Ephrem was one of the first known Christian writers to give voice to Death as a character and to imagine the death of Jesus and his descent to the dead in dramatic fashion and cosmic perspective.

This chapter, therefore, explores how Ephrem drew upon and adapted early Christian traditions about Jesus' defeat of Death and Satan by using the techniques of personification and speech-in-character to flesh out the details of the Gospel Passion narrative. To begin, I will examine the portrayal of Death and the story of its defeat in Ephrem's *Mêmrâ on Our Lord*. I will place Ephrem's version of the motif within the context of early variant forms of this imagery that circulated in early Christian circles in the fourth century (most famously Gregory of Nyssa's "fishhook"). The uniquely central role of Death in Ephrem's version, I argue, connects Ephrem's variant of the story to older Syriac traditions and, indeed, to the very earliest Christian references to Jesus' descent to Sheol/Hades.

In the second part of the chapter, I will consider Ephrem's dramatic dialogue poems on Jesus' descent to Sheol, the realm of the dead (*Nis.* 36–42), which are spoken primarily in the voice of the personified characters of Death, Satan, and Sheol (but especially Death). Ephrem's fixation on Death as the charac-

ter overcome by Jesus' death, I will argue, should be seen as a legacy of earlier Syriac Christian traditions which imagined Jesus victorious over a hungry, bestial Death. Ephrem then forged these earlier allusions to a personified Death into a full-fledged character, whose monologues and dialogues fill the *On Nisibis madrāšê* cycle. In those poems, Ephrem uniquely used Death's voice to narrate the events of Jesus' descent to Sheol, the realm of the dead. Unsurprisingly, in light of what I showed in the previous chapter, the raising of the dead at Jesus' death (Matt 27:52–53) is integral to this drama. I will pay particular attention to the characterization of Death and the depiction of the descent as an event. I explore how Ephrem drew upon the resources of his society to construct a Death who is boastful, hungry, and ultimately pitiful, and a Sheol who is stereotypically feminine in her performance of mourning for the loss of her children. In keeping with the occasional nature of Ephrem's theological imagination, these characterizations (and even the event of the descent to Sheol itself) are not consistent. The final step in this section is to step back and consider the possible reasons for this focus on the personified Death in Ephrem's context.

It would be easy to dismiss Ephrem here as indulging a folkloric or mythological version of Jesus' death. We can assume that the dogmatic historians of the late 19th and early 20th century who wrote on the history of the doctrine of atonement (like Franks, Ritschl, Grensted, and Rashdall), if they had commented on Ephrem, would have taken this perspective, judging from their comments on the "fishhook" and ransom motifs in early Christianity.[1] To be sure, Ephrem was not attempting to answer the kinds of questions raised by modern, post-Reformation, post-Enlightenment theology. Nor were Ephrem's goals the same as those of a systematic theologian attempting to craft an elegant structure of ideas to explain the meaning of Christ's death. Rather, Ephrem was clearly interested in exploring these moments of dramatic tension, like Jesus' death, from different angles (like the perspective of the personified Death), and he did so primarily by means of publicly performed homilies and liturgical poems.

Ultimately, the focus of this chapter is on Ephrem's creative appropriation of existing Christian traditions. If we are to understand how Ephrem imagined the events and consequences of the death of Jesus, we cannot simply mine his writings for theological content. We must attend to the literary genres of his works and the broader context for the use of personification and speech-

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1   Franks, *Work of Christ*, 80; Ritschl, *Critical History*, 5; Grensted, *Short History*, 35; Rashdall, *Idea of Atonement*, 306.

in-character in late antiquity. Situating Ephrem's creative use of Death as a character in the context of longstanding Christian traditions also allows us to keep Ephrem in a broader perspective, recognizing the ways in which he drew upon ideas well known throughout the early Christian world, and his innovative use of them.

2 The Personified Death and the Conquering Jesus: Death and Its Defeat in Ephrem's *Mêmrâ on Our Lord*

In this first section, I will examine Ephrem's narrative of the Son's defeat of the bestial, personified Death in the *Mêmrâ on our Lord*.[2] Although there are other forms of this story in Ephrem's writings, I focus here on his longest and most detailed version. I will situate the *Mêmrâ on our Lord* in relation to the various versions of "fishhook" imagery circulating in the fourth century. Ephrem's *mêmrâ* deserves attention both in its similarities to and differences from those other accounts (most famously that of Gregory of Nyssa). In particular, its unique features—especially the singular role of Death and the emphasis on divine victory or conquest—offer hints to the origin of Ephrem's version of the story. Indeed, as I will argue, the very idea of a conflict between Jesus and a personified Death in Sheol (as seen in Ephrem's dialogue poems) must have developed from some form of this tradition.

2.1   *The Confrontation with Death in the* Mêmrâ on Our Lord
The *Mêmrâ on Our Lord* is a lengthy artistic prose homily, and as such is a unique text among the writings of Ephrem.[3] The heart of the *mêmrâ* is the account of the "sinful woman" at the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36–50). Yet Ephrem's imagination leads him far afield from this story, to the narrative of the golden calf (Exod 32) and Saul's encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9).[4] Although we can analyze its contents and its

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2   The most notable other example is *Azym.* 16.5–7.

3   The *mêmrâ* is a striking example of what Sebastian Brock has called Syriac *Kunstprosa*, a style distinguished from the "straightforward prose" of Ephrem's prose commentaries and prose polemical works. Brock, "Ephrem's Letter to Publius," 263.

4   As we might expect, there is a logic behind Ephrem's wide-ranging biblical imagination here. In her study of Ephrem's exegetical technique in the *Mêmrâ on our Lord*, Angela Kim argues that Ephrem uses the word "sign" to interweave his conflation of Exod 32 and Num 5 with the sinful woman and Saul, who recognize Christ's divinity. In addition to this "verbal link," she also observes that Ephrem draws these stories together for thematic purposes, in order to create an antithetical parallelism between the sinful woman, the great example of faith, and

use of common Ephremic "poetic" devices like direct address, anaphora, and antithetical parallelism, scholars cannot say much with confidence about the context of the *Mêmrâ on Our Lord*.[5] However, given that it bears many of the same characteristics as Ephrem's metrical poems, it is probable that it was performed publicly, perhaps in liturgy or in a para-liturgical setting.

Ephrem opens the *mêmrâ* by narrating the story of Jesus from a cosmic perspective. He argues that everything Jesus did—his incarnation, teaching, and death—was driven by a single purpose: to "endure death ... in order to overthrow death."[6] Ephrem depicts Death here as a personified force, a greedy destroyer whose reign runs contrary to God, who is the source of life. When Jesus submitted himself to crucifixion, Ephrem explains, this personified Death, because of its gluttonous desire for all living things, was unable to resist him:

> He is the One who submitted and endured death, according to his will, in order to overthrow Death, contrary to its will. Our Lord carried his cross and went out as Death willed. But on the cross he called out and brought the dead out of Sheol, contrary to Death's will. With the very weapon that death had used to kill him, he gained the victory over Death. Divinity disguised itself in humanity and approached [Death], which killed, then was killed: Death killed natural life, but supernatural life killed Death.[7]

This excerpt is rich with paradox: by submitting himself to the will of death in accepting the cross, Jesus worked against the will of death, and even "killed" it with the "weapon" of his human body. This human body was the means by which the Son carried out his plan—"concealing" (*eṭṭašyat*) his divinity in humanity.

In the paragraph that follows, Ephrem explains that the Son knew that he would need a body in order to be devoured by Sheol and thus undo its power.

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the golden calf, the ultimate example of unfaithfulness. See Angela Y. Kim, "Signs of Ephrem's Exegetical Techniques in His Homily on Our Lord," *Hugoye* 3, no. 1 (2000): 55–70, 64–65.

5 See Brock, "Ephrem's Letter to Publius," 265.

6 *SdDN* 3.1 (ed. Beck, *SdDN*, 3; trans. Amar and Mathews, *Selected Prose Works*, 277).

7 *SdDN* 3.1: ܗܘ ܗܘ ܕܐܫܬܥܒܕ ܘܣܒܠ ܡܘܬܐ ܒܨܒܝܢܗ. ܕܢܗܦܘܟ ܠܡܘܬܐ ܕܠܐ ܒܨܒܝܢܗ. (ed. Beck, *SdDN*, 3; trans. adapted from Amar and Mathews, *Selected Prose Works*, 277–278).

For this reason, then, he took on flesh from the Virgin Mary. Ephrem imagines Mary here as a sprouting branch from the "old vine" of Eve, with Jesus as her life-bearing "fruit." Jesus knew that the divine "life" he contained would prove poisonous to death and make it "vomit him out" along with many of the dead it had consumed.[8] Death, of course, could not resist:

> And when Death came as usual to feed, life swallowed death instead. This is the food that hungered to eat the one who eats it. Therefore, Death vomited up the many lives which it had greedily swallowed because of a single fruit which it had ravenously swallowed. The hunger that drove it after one was the undoing of the voraciousness that had driven it after many. Death succeeded in eating the one [fruit], but it quickly vomited out the many. As the one [fruit] was dying on the cross, many of the buried came forth from Sheol at [the sound of] His voice.[9]

According to Ephrem, Jesus' submission to Death led to the undoing of Death's power over many others who had died. By swallowing Jesus, Death consumed a power it could not contain. Ephrem explains his point by means of a rather unsavory analogy: "When a person's stomach is upset, he vomits out what agrees with him as well as what disagrees with him."[10] The sick stomach makes no distinction between the foods it has consumed. In the same way, Death vomited out both Jesus, the "Medicine of Life" (*sām ḥayyê*)[11] and many others it had consumed (the dead raised at Jesus' death).[12] The raising of the dead (Matt 27:52–53) thus plays a central role in this narrative, as the demonstration of the life-giving power brought about by Jesus' death. Death is unable to hold onto its prey: it "vomits up" many of the dead along with Jesus, a fact which demon-

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8   For this image, see also *Azym.* 16.5–7.

9   *SdDN* 3.3: ܐܬܐ ܐܕܘܬܐ ܐܒܘܕܗ ܥܢܟ ܐܝܟܒܪ ܐܡܪܝܟ ܐܘܗܦܘܩ ܗܡܠܚ ܣܬܟ ܐܬܘܚܠ. ܐܗܡ ܐܘܗ ܐܕܒܠܕ ܪܝܟܪ ܐܠܡܘܚܠ ܐܠܘܐܕܪ ܐܢܘܝܟܐ ܣܬ ܗܡܘܚܠ ܐܠܘܐܕܪ ܐܬܘܚܐܬܟܪ. ܣܬ ܐܕܝܟܪ ܐܟܝܥܫ ܣܬ ܐܠܐ. ܪܚ ܐܡܝܢܐܬܗܕ ܥܡܘܚܕ ܐܬܘܚܕ. ܐܟܝܥܫ ܐܟܝܕܪ ܐܟܝܥܫ ܣܬ ܐܠܐ ܪܚ ܐܡܢܝܐܬܗܕ. ܪܚ ܐܠܬܚܠ ܐܬܘܗܟ ܡܪ ܐܘܗ ܢܘܝܟܐ ܐܟܝܥܫ ܡܗ ܐܘܗ ܐܕܢܚܠܕ ܡܪ ܗܬܘܡܘܟܚ. ܪܚ ܐܬܢܚܡ. ܐܬܢܚܡ ܐܟܚ ܗܟܟ ܐܥܘܡܫܝ ܠܚ ܣܪ ܐܢܠ ܗܟ ܐܟܝܥܫ ܡܡܚܢ ܗܡܠ ܐܕܘܥ ܗܟ ܡܥ (ed. Beck, *SdDN*, 3–4; trans. Amar and Mathews, *Selected Prose Works*, 278–279).

10   *SdDN* 3.4 (ed. Beck, *SdDN*, 4; trans. Amar and Mathews, *Selected Prose Works*, 279). Cf. *Azym.* 16.7; Aphrahat, *Dem.* 22.5.

11   On Christ as the "Medicine of Life," see Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 99–100; Aho Shemunkasho, *Healing in the Theology of St. Ephrem* (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2002).

12   In the sixth century, Romanos, who was apparently familiar with Syriac traditions of the descent to Sheol, alludes to this tradition in *kontakion* "On the Victory of the Cross" (22.1) (ed. Grosdidier de Matons, *Hymnes*, Vol. 2).

strates that the Son's triumph was not for himself alone, but for the dead more broadly. Ephrem notably does not seem to evoke the Diatessaronic version of this passage, but a version more like the Peshitta: note the text's reference to "many of the buried" (*qbîrrê saggîʾê*) rather than "the dead" (*mîtê*). The variant "the buried" does not appear in any known Syriac version, but the limited scope implied by "many" gives an impression that the Diatessaron is not in view here.

The prominence of this narrative in the *Mêmrâ on Our Lord* raises several questions that I will explore below. Where did Ephrem get these ideas? What were his sources? How did his narrative of the confrontation between Jesus and Death compare to similar accounts from other Christian writers of the fourth century?

2.2 *The Confrontation with Death in Its Fourth-Century Context*

In the late fourth century, Ephrem's younger contemporary Gregory of Nyssa told his own version of this story, one subsequently echoed by numerous early Christian writers and well known still as a quintessential example of early Christian "atonement theology." In this account, the dying Christ deceived Satan, offering himself like a "fishhook" (ἄγκριστον) to a hungry fish.[13] Gregory openly characterized Christ's actions as a "deception" (ἀπάτη), a dissimulation that was also "a crowning example of justice and wisdom."[14] The story was strikingly similar in some respects to what we see in Ephrem's *Mêmrâ on Our Lord*: as divinity in human flesh, Jesus drew God's enemies into their undoing.[15] Yet there are, of course, some noteworthy differences between the two narratives: first, in Ephrem's *mêmrâ*, Death, not Satan, is the enemy defeated by Christ. In this respect, as I will argue, Ephrem's version better reflects the earliest Christian traditions. Furthermore, Ephrem does not use the metaphor of the fishhook, unlike Gregory, who specifically uses that terminology. Nor indeed does

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13 Gregory of Nyssa, *De tridui spatio* (ed. Ernest Gebhardt, *Sermones Pars 1*, GNO 9 [Leiden: Brill, 1992]), 281.

14 Gregory of Nyssa, *Cat. or.* 26 (ed. Ekkehard Mühlenberg, *Gregorii Nysseni Oratio catechetica*, GNO 3.4 [Leiden: Brill, 1996], 62; trans. Cyril Richardson, *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy [Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1954], 302).

15 See Gregory of Nyssa, *Cat. Or.* 24; idem, *De trid. spat.* Pseudo-Athanasius, *Homily on the Passion and the Cross* (PG 28:240) speaks of Christ as a military commander feigning weakness to trap his enemy, and compares him to Odysseus veiling his identity on his return to Ithaca to overcome his wife's suitors. Augustine, *Sermon* 130, similarly imagines Jesus as a "mousetrap." John of Damascus (*De orth. fid.* 3.27) adopts the "fishhook" imagery, but like Ephrem substitutes Death for Satan. Other early late antique witnesses to this sort of imagery include John Chrysostom, *Hom. Matt.* 26.39; Rufinus, *Expositio symboli* 16; Ambrose, *Comm. Luc.* 4.11. For more, see Constas, "Last Temptation," 146.

Ephrem portray or characterize the actions of Christ as a trick or act of deceit, unlike what we see in Gregory's narrative. Deception was considered a legitimate device in certain situations in Greek and Roman antiquity, especially for figures in authority, as Nicholas Constas demonstrates.[16] However, such a notion is not in view for Ephrem, and would likely have run contrary to his nearly universal tendency to ascribe deception to divine enemies (especially Satan and Jews), rather than to God.

The similarities and differences between the narratives of Gregory and Ephrem raise the question of origins. Constas argues that what he calls the early Christian divine deception motif was a development among Greek-speaking pro-Nicene theologians during the divisions of the fourth century, an attempt to "reconfigure" the disgrace and human weakness of the Passion narratives into a clever divine "plan."[17] Constas persuasively shows how the "fishhook" idea became popular in anti-"Arian" homilies of the late fourth century (he references Gregory's works, a homily by Amphilochius of Iconium, and several pseudonymous homilies attributed to Athanasius and John Chrysostom).[18] While Constas demonstrates the increasing prominence of the "fishhook" narrative among fourth-century Greek Christian writers, he did not engage with contemporaneous Syriac evidence. Although it is impossible to date most of Ephrem's writings with certainty, the *Mêmrâ on Our Lord* was almost surely written sometime between ca. 350 and ca. 370.[19] Perhaps a generation earlier, hints of the narrative described by Ephrem also appear in Aphrahat's *Demonstration* 22.[20] Ephrem's *mêmrâ* certainly predates Gregory of Nyssa's *Great Catechism* and potentially all the Greek anti-Arian homilies cited by Constas.[21]

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16   Constas, "Last Temptation," 142. For a summary of 20th century scholars' negative reactions to this motif in early Christian literature, see Constas, "Last Temptation," 145–146.

17   Constas, "Last Temptation," 141.

18   Constas, "Last Temptation," 159–161.

19   The text offers no internal clues as to the time of its composition and delivery, so I am opting for placing it within this broad chronological range, within which Ephrem likely wrote the majority of his works. For a more complete account of my approach to the problem of dating Ephrem's writings, see Hartung, "Authorship and Dating," 311–317.

20   *Dem.* 22.4–5. In Aphrahat's account, we find a similar metaphor of person vomiting up poisonous food, and an allusion to Death's loss of control over the dead who are raised at the time of Jesus' death. A major difference, however, in this version is that Death recognizes Christ when he comes down to Sheol and bars its gates to him because it knows what Christ will be able to do to it. Death does not react this way in any of Ephrem's versions of the story.

21   Gregory's *Great Catechism* probably dates from 383–384. See David O. Balás, "Gregory of Nyssa," in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed., ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Routledge, 1999), 496. The best candidate for an antecedent to Ephrem is the Greek

While the narrative of the Son's defeat of Death in the Syriac tradition is distinct from the "divine deception" or "fishhook" motif in certain ways, it is nevertheless closely related, and may in fact be older than any of the Greek "fishhook" narratives.[22]

Regardless of its date, does the *mêmrâ* support Constas's argument that the "fishhook" motif developed in fourth-century anti-"Arian" circles? The evidence is mixed in this respect. The *Mêmrâ on Our Lord* is not explicitly anti-"Arian" or focused on refuting subordinationist Christologies, though it does contain occasional parallels to the anti-subordinationist rhetoric of Ephrem's *Hymns on Faith* and *Mêmrê on Faith*, especially in its critique of inappropriate "investigation" of the divine begetting of the Son.[23] For instance, near the beginning of the *Mêmrâ on Our Lord*, Ephrem writes: "His birth from the Father is not to be investigated; rather, it is to be believed."[24] Another hint of contemporary Christological debate appears in the section quoted above, in which Ephrem highlights the divine will of Jesus at work in the events of his death: "He is the One who submitted and endured death, according to his will, in order to overthrow Death, contrary to its will."[25] A parallel to this framing appears also in *Azym.* 16, a poem focused on the operation of Jesus' will in moments of apparent weakness, in which he includes the defeat of Death as one example: "Because he willed it, greedy Death devoured him; / it devoured him, and spat him back out because he willed it."[26] In both of these cases, Ephrem uses this narrative as evidence for his view that because Jesus was the divine Son, his will possessed total freedom, independent from his human body.

Although this theological perspective would not pass muster in some later Christological circles, it reflects Ephrem's context in the fourth century—

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homily *On the Passion and the Cross* pseudonymously attributed to Athanasius. Drobner argues that this homily must date to before 350. See Hubertus R. Drobner, "Eine Pseudo-Athanasianiche Osterpredigt über die Wahrheit Gottes und ihre Erfüllung," in *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity: Essays in Tribute to George Christopher Stead*, ed. Lionel R. Wickham and Caroline P. Bammel (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 43–51.

22   A homily *On All Saints* preserved in Armenian and attributed to Gregory Thaumaturgus (late third century) mentions this idea as well, but is likely a later production. See Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 2, repr. (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, Inc.: 1986), 128.

23   See Wickes, *Bible and Poetry*, Chapter 2.

24   ܡܬܒܩܝܘܬܐ ܐܠܐ ܕܢܬܗܝܡܢ ܠܐ ܐܒܘܗܝ ܗܘ ܡܢ ܡܘܠܕܗ (*SdDN* 2.3; ed. Beck, *SdDN*, 2; trans. Amar and Mathews, *Selected Prose Works*, 276).

25   ܗܘ ܕܐܫܬܥܒܕ ܘܣܝܒܪ ܡܘܬܐ ܐܝܟ ܨܒܝܢܗ.ܘܢܣܚܘܦܝܘܗܝ, ܠܡܘܬܐ ܐܠܐ ܨܒܝܢܗ ܡܢ ܨܒܝܢܗ (*SdDN* 3.1; ed. Beck, *SdDN*, 3; trans. adapted from Amar and Mathews, *Selected Prose Works*, 277).

26   ܡܛܠ ܕܨܒܐ ܒܠܥܗ ܗܘ ܡܘܬܐ ܝܥܢܐ \ ܒܠܥܗ ܘܦܩ ܐܦ ܦܩܗ ܡܛܠ ܕܨܒܐ (*Azym.* 16.5; ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 28; trans. Walters, *Unleavened Bread*, 70).

namely, his strong opposition to any Christologies that subordinated the Son
to the Father or denied the Son's status as creator. While Ephrem used the nar-
rative of the divine defeat of Death to generally affirm the divinity of the Son,
such a message is not particularly anti-"Arian," as it could also refute Marcionite
Christians or Manichaeans. If Ephrem had used the motif in more explicitly
pro-Nicene polemic, we would expect to find it referenced in his anti-"Arian"
Hymns on Faith and *Mêmrê on Faith*. It does not, however, commonly appear
in those collections.

In sum, Ephrem's *Mêmrâ on our Lord* could perhaps support Constas's con-
tention that the "fishhook" motif developed in fourth-century anti-"Arian" cir-
cles. Like the Greek Christian writers of the fourth century, Ephrem uses long-
standing traditional imagery to support his stance against what he sees as spec-
ulative theological inquiry and to assert his views regarding the divine agency
of the Son. Beyond this, however, Ephrem's use of the "fishhook" motif is not
explicitly pro-Nicene or anti-"Arian." Nor does he portray the actions of Jesus as
a trick or deception. Perhaps this particular emphasis did emerge in an explic-
itly pro-Nicene Greek theological context. Even so, the commonalities between
Ephrem and the roughly contemporaneous Greek homilies should not be over-
looked.

2.3   *Ephrem and the Origins of the Narrative of Christ's Defeat of Death*
To be sure, Constas does not argue that fourth-century Greek anti-"Arian"
preachers invented the narrative of a confrontation between Christ and Satan
from whole cloth, nor would I claim that it was concocted by fourth-century
Syriac writers like Ephrem or Aphrahat. Instead, Constas and most other schol-
ars would trace the origins of the "fishhook" motif to long before the fourth
century—to a very early Christian exegetical synthesis of an array of biblical
images, such as the Leviathan in Job (Job 40:25), Christ-Jonah parallelism (Matt
12:40), and a reading of Psalm 22's "I am a worm and not a man" in light of Jesus'
crucifixion.[27]

This is a persuasive explanation of the origins of the motif, and I would not
challenge it. I would, however, modify the claim by describing the Syriac ver-
sion known to Ephrem and Aphrahat (which we might call the "Christ as poison
pill" motif) and the anti-"Arian" "fishhook" motif as two independent devel-
opments originating from these common traditional sources. As evidence of
this independent development, the Syriac version (as seen in the *Mêmrâ on*

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27   Nicholas E. Lombardo, *The Father's Will: Christ's Crucifixion and the Goodness of God*
      (Oxford University Press, 2014), 201–203; Constas, "Last Temptation," 14.

our Lord) which arose from this exegetical synthesis maintains an essential element of the earlier tradition that we should consider more closely. Syriac sources highlight the personified figure of "Death" in a way not found in Greek Christian texts of the fourth and fifth centuries (e.g., Gregory of Nyssa)—for which the enemy Christ overcame was Satan.

The central role Death plays in Ephrem's version of this story has its roots in earlier Syriac traditions that personified Death and imagined Jesus' confrontation with Death in Sheol. We find the earliest Syriac witness to these ideas in *Odes of Solomon* 42.11–12, in which Christ speaks: "Sheol saw me and was grieved / and Death vomited me up and many with me. / I was vinegar and gall to it."[28] This passages echoes much of what we saw in the *Mêmrâ on Our Lord*. "Many with me" (*wal-saggîê am*[*y*]) refers to the risen "dead" of Matt 27:52–53, and parallels "many of the buried" (*qbîrê saggîê*) in *Mêmrâ on Our Lord* 3.3. Much like Ephrem and Aphrahat, this passage in the *Odes* also reflects the idea that the death of Jesus was a kind of "poison pill" for Death. The risen Jesus here describes himself as "vinegar and gall" for Death.[29] Finally, like Ephrem, the *Odes* imagine Death as a vaguely personified monstrous figure who "vomited up" (*atîban*[*y*]) Jesus and the other dead.

This version of the story told in the *Odes* and in greater detail later by Ephrem shares much in common with the earliest Christian allusions or references to Jesus' descent to Sheol/Hades, in which Jesus defeats Hades or the powers of death that guarded the dead, not Satan.[30] For example, Melito's *On Pascha*, a second-century Greek text from Asia Minor with interesting parallels to Ephrem's writings, gives voice to the figure of Christ risen from the dead, proclaiming his defeat of Death and Hades in language that hints at a descent narrative and a personification of Death.[31]

By the fourth century, however, Greek and Latin Christian versions of the "fishhook" motif centered the role of Satan as the enemy defeated by the divine trap. Yet, as Nicholas Lombardo observes, a certain fluidity endured in the descriptions of this event among Greek and Latin Christian writers, such that

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28 ܚܒܪ ܐܠܘܬܟܐ ܘܠܘܒܕܗ ܐܘܕܝ ܐܗܘܒܐ ܘ : ܕܘܐܬܗܝܟܐ ܝܕܗ ܥܒܕ ܠܒܪ ܣܝܕܘ. (ed. and trans. James H. Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon: The Syriac Texts*, Pseudepigrapha Series 7, Texts and Translations 13 [Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978], 144).

29 See Aphrahat, *Dem.* 22.4–5.

30 See, for example, *Ascension of Isaiah* 9.16–17, where Christ struggles against the angel of Death, rather than Satan. For more, see Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, trans. John A. Baker (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964), 242.

31 See Melito, *On Pascha* 102 (ed. Stuart George Hall. *Melito of Sardis: On Pascha and fragments*, Oxford Early Christian Texts [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979]).

they often described Death and Satan "interchangeably."[32] An excellent example appears in a brief reference to the fishhook motif in Cyril of Jerusalem's 12th *Catechetical Lecture*, written roughly around the time of the *Mêmrâ on Our Lord*.[33] Cyril describes how Christ used his human flesh against the devil, luring in Death to swallow him up, so that the devil's power would be undone.[34] We should note how easily Cyril moves between the characters of the devil and Death, equating the devil's power with the power of mortality. Although Ephrem sometimes imagines Christ triumphing over Satan as well as Death and sometimes portrays the two figures as aligned with one another, his description of Jesus' divine victory does not reflect the fluidity Lombardo describes. Rather, he consistently depicts Death as the conquered enemy. This suggests, once again, that Ephrem reflects an earlier stream of tradition centering the personification of Death.

Personifications of Death have a long history in the ancient Mediterranean (from the Canaanite Mot to the Greek Thanatos), well before early Christians began imagining their own personifications.[35] Parallels between these personifications and the early Christian personification of Death/Hades are probably incidental, based on common features of death experienced by humans across cultures—like its arbitrary nature, its permanence, and its all consuming power. The earliest Christian representations of Death personified specifically focus on Jesus' death, and have their origins in biblical exegetical traditions. The depiction of Death "swallowing" Jesus and "vomiting" him back up must have originated in parallels between Jesus and Jonah, seen already in the Gospel of Matthew. To be clear, the idea of equating Jonah's experience within the belly of the fish and Jesus' experience of death in the underworld is not an interpretive choice that is completely foreign to the text of Jonah. Jonah's psalm (Jon 2:1–9) portrays the prophet's escape from the fish as divine deliverance from the "the

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32   Lombardo, *The Father's Will*, 209. Lombardo argues that this fluidity allows us to understand early Christian descriptions of ransom not as literal claims that the devil had a legal hold over humanity, but as flexible, metaphorical descriptions of Christ's victory. To support this characterization, he cites (among other sources) Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 3.18.7; Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 16.8; Eusebius of Caesarea, *De theophania* 3.

33   This collection of texts is usually dated to around 350. See E.J. Yarnold, s.j., *Cyril of Jerusalem* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2000), 22.

34   Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 12.15.

35   Indeed, the myth of Baal's descent to the underworld to defeat Mot (related in the late Bronze Age Baal cycle from Ugarit) is the closest parallel to the early Christian descent narrative from the ancient Mediterranean. That being said, the vast chronological distance between these stories makes it impossible to prove any kind of influence, as Richard Bauckham argues. See *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 93 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 43.

Pit," or Sheol (Jon 2:6).[36] Likewise, biblical and post-biblical texts had already long portrayed Sheol as a "mouth" (Isa 5:14). It is not difficult to see, then, how the earliest Christian interpreters, drawing upon these sources, came to portray Death as a hungry beast that swallowed up Jesus for "three days and three nights" (Matt 12:40). This early idea of Death as a gluttonous monster, a consuming maw that devours all, is the personification of Death we find in the Syriac tradition (from the *Odes of Solomon* to Ephrem's *Mêmrâ on Our Lord*).[37]

I will not attempt any further to reconstruct the transmission history of this personification of Death, which likely originated in very early Christian homiletical or poetic traditions. We can say for certain, however, that the notion of personifying death and Sheol appears in Syriac texts prior to Ephrem, as early as the late second or third century, depending on the date of the Syriac version of the *Odes of Solomon* and whether that was the original language of composition (both hotly debated topics).[38] Indeed, there are reasons to suppose that these Syriac traditions precede the composition of the *Odes*.

In the previous chapter, I argued that Matt 27:52–53 played a particularly special role in Ephrem's conceptualization of the death of Jesus and its salvific significance. Ephrem drew upon the unique variant of the passage found in the Diatessaron Gospel, and used it to demonstrate the life-giving power of Jesus' death. I also argued that Ephrem was predisposed toward imagery of "life" and "death" due to the translations of salvation imagery in the Syriac versions of the

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36 See Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 17.

37 This image of Death from early Christianity, as Georgia Frank notes, stands in stark contrast with the skeletal depiction of Death found in later medieval Christian art from western Europe. (Georgia Frank, "Death in the Flesh: Picturing Death's Body and Abode in Late Antiquity," in *Looking Beyond: Visions, Dreams and Insights in Medieval Art and History*, ed. Colum Hourihane; Occasional Papers from the Index of Christian Art 11 [University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010], 69–73).

38 Advocates of a Syriac original include James Charlesworth (*The Odes of Solomon*, 11–12); Henry Chadwick, "Some Reflections on the Character and Theology of the Odes of Solomon," in *Kyriakon*, ed. P. Granfield and J.A. Jungmann (Münster: Aschendorff, 1977), 266; Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 25; Luise Abramowski, "Sprache und Abfassungszeit der Oden Salomos," *OrChr* 68 (1984): 80–90, 83. Michael Lattke is a prominent skeptic of the idea of a Syriac original, noting the presence of Greek loan words and what he sees as oddities of the Syriac that point to the characteristics of Greek grammatical style. (*Odes of Solomon: A Commentary*, trans. Marianne Ehrhardt, ed. Harold W. Attridge Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009], 10). Some, like David Aune, have attempted to bridge the gap; he proposes, "tentatively," that the *Odes* were originally written in Greek, "but in a milieu in which Asianic rhetoric and Semitic poetics had a strong influence on Greek style." (D.E. Aune, "The Present Realization of Eschatological Salvation in the Odes of Solomon," in *The Cultic Setting of Realized Eschatology in Early Christianity* [Leiden: Brill, 1972], 168–169).

New Testament. If Syriac Christians understood the raising of the dead at Jesus'
death as one of the most significant events surrounding the death of Jesus, and
employed "life" and "death" as the primary metaphors to describe the salvific
benefits of Jesus, it is unsurprising that they would imagine these events as a
sort of contest between Jesus and Death itself. We see hints of this background
in the dichotomy between Death and the divine "life" hidden within the body
of Jesus in the *Mêmrâ on Our Lord*.[39]

Ephrem's *Mêmrâ on Our Lord*, therefore, offers a window into a distinctly
Syriac narrative of Christ's defeat of Death, one that predates the "divine decep-
tion" or "fishhook" motif made famous by Gregory of Nyssa. While Gregory's
evocation of the fishhook is typically seen as the prototypical example of this
"mythic" early Christian narrative of Christ's death, Ephrem's version is cer-
tainly older and notably different in some important respects. Unlike Gregory
and the other fourth-century Greek sources, Ephrem accentuates the role of
"Death," personified as a gluttonous devourer unable to resist the lure of Jesus'
human flesh. Death swallows him up, only to find that he cannot contain Jesus'
divine "life" and thus disgorges him and the other dead with him. This portrayal,
I have argued, has its roots in very ancient Christian references to Jesus' descent
to Sheol/Hades which centered the role of Death as the enemy he defeated.
This tradition evolved out of an exegetical synthesis linking Christ's visit to the
underworld to Jonah's. Such a link likely informed how Death was imagined as a
great monster and a consuming mouth. While other Christian sources began to
privilege a clash between Jesus and Satan, Syriac Christian sources preserved
the early emphasis on a confrontation between Jesus and personified Death.
This Syriac tradition may have drawn further support from the variant reading
of Matt 27:52–53 in the Diatessaron gospel and the use of "life" (*ḥayyê*) and its
related words to render most of the references to salvation in the Syriac ver-
sions of the New Testament.

3   Adapting the Drama of the Descent to Sheol

Ephrem followed these earlier Syriac traditions of personifying death and Sheol
and portraying the crucifixion of Jesus as a cosmic confrontation with these
forces and developed those ideas in new and creative ways. In the section
that follows, I will examine several monologue and dialogue poems focused
on Jesus' descent to Sheol and involving the personified characters of Death,

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39   See *SdDN* 3.2.

Sheol, and Satan (*Nis.* 36–42). These poems illustrate most vividly how Ephrem drew on older traditions, using late antique techniques of personification to bring these traditions to life for his audiences. The results of this reception are poems distinct in their narrative details, function, and style from other descent narratives of late antiquity.

3.1 *Ephrem's Descent Poems in the Context of Early Christian Literature*

The narrative of the descent of Christ to the realm of the dead (or the "Harrowing of Hell") became a major feature of Christian preaching in the fourth and fifth centuries. Its origins, however, go back to the late first or early second century, with some of the oldest references in 1 Peter (3:18–22; 4:6), the letters of Ignatius (*Magnesians* 9:2), and *The Shepherd of Hermas*.[40] The most well-known accounts of the tale of the descent from late antiquity are the fifth-century *Gospel of Nicodemus* (appended to the earlier *Acts of Pilate*) and the sixth-century *kontakia* of Romanos. These texts played major roles in popularizing dramatic retellings of the descent narrative in Latin, Greek, and later medieval vernacular traditions.[41] However, Ephrem's dialogue *madrāšê* on the subject (*Nis.* 35–42) predate both of these texts.[42] Their inclusion in a poetic collection entitled *On Nisibis* suggests that they were written sometime before Ephrem fled Nisibis for Edessa in 363, though we cannot be certain.

Ephrem's descent poems and his theology of Christ's descent have been a matter of scholarly interest for many decades.[43] Most recently, Ephrem's under-

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40   See Jared Wicks, "Christ's Saving Descent to the Dead: Early Witnesses from Ignatius of Antioch to Origen," *Pro Ecclesia* 17 (2008): 281–309.

41   The *Gospel of Nicodemus* begins with a framing narrative relating the discovery of the text and its translation into Greek by Ananias, a Jewish convert to Christianity, in the early fifth century. Though much of the content of *Gos. Nic.* (including the descent to Hades narrative) almost certainly predates this, the text as we have it cannot have been written prior to 418. For these dating issues, see Paul C. Dilley, "The Invention of Christian Tradition: Apocrypha, Imperial Policy, and Anti-Jewish Propaganda," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 50 (2010): 586–615, 592–594; Philip Fackler, "Adversus Adversus Iudaeos?: Countering Christian Anti-Jewish Polemics in the Gospel of Nicodemus," *JECS* 23, no. 3 (2015): 413–444, 420–421.

42   If we accept a fifth- or sixth-century date for the extant version of the Gospel of Nicodemus, as most scholars do, the stories of the descent contained in Ephrem's dialogue poems are obviously earlier than this, challenging Ehrman and Plese's claim that "the account of the Descent in the Gospel of Nicodemus B is our oldest surviving record of these stories." (Bart Ehrman and Zlatko Plese, *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011], 466).

43   Teixidor, "Le thème de la descente"; Gribomont, "Le triomphe de Pâques," 174–183; Jouko Martikainen, *Das Böse und der Teufel in der Theologie Ephraems des Syrers: Eine Systematisch-theologische Untersuchung*, Meddelanden Från Stiftelsens för Åbo Akademi Forskn-

standing of the doctrine of the descent was the subject of a published dissertation by Thomas Buchan.[44] This work, while incredibly valuable as a synthetic treatment of Ephrem's multifaceted use of the theme of Christ's descent, should not be seen as the final word on the subject. Ephrem's descent poems are noteworthy for their literary form as much as for their theological content.[45] As I said above, the literary form (especially the personification of the figure of Death) will be my focus in the remainder of this chapter. Indeed, as I have noted throughout this study, a systematic reconstruction of Ephrem's theology—a problematic and unwieldy task—is not my objective.

In *Nis.* 35–42, Ephrem utilizes imaginative composed speeches from the personified figures of Death, Sheol, and Satan in order to portray the effects of Jesus' death and descent upon those characters. This aspect of Ephrem's poems resembles what we find in the later Greek poems of Romanos and the *Gospel of Nicodemus* (which circulated in a wide variety of languages) and the medieval descent narratives they influenced. Ephrem's poems provide the earliest witnesses to many of the common motifs of those texts: the acrimonious dialogue between Death (or Hades or Sheol) and Satan (or Beliar), the resounding voice of Jesus in the midst of the underworld, and the breaking of the gates of Sheol/Hades.

These commonalities suggest that Ephrem drew on earlier texts or traditions (now lost) that were similar to those known by the writer of the *Gospel of Nicodemus* and Romanos. Perhaps the idea of Death/Hades and Satan/Beliar arguing with one another (with Death increasingly convinced of Jesus' divinity) was derived from Syriac dispute traditions, or was an innovation of Ephrem himself. As Georgia Frank observes, however, Ephrem's treatment of the descent story differs from other late antique narratives in that he does not introduce Adam or the biblical patriarchs as characters to narrate the events, but focuses his attention solely on the "victims" of Jesus' victory over the underworld—particularly the personifications of Death and Satan.[46]

The central role played by Death (and Death's portrayal as being initially ignorant of Jesus' identity) in Ephrem's tellings of the descent is likely a development of the Syriac tradition of the divine defeat of Death, which I discussed above. Yet the character of Death is significantly more fleshed out when com-

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ingsinstitut 32 (Åbo: Publications of Research Institute of the Åbo Akademi Foundation, 1978).

44   Buchan, *"Blessed is He"*.

45   These poems are formally and thematically distinct from the poems framed as *disputes* between Death and Satan (*Nis.* 52–59), which I will discuss in more detail below.

46   Frank, "Death in the Flesh," 63.

pared with the tradition of Death as the mindless, ever-hungry maw reflected in Ephrem's *Mêmrâ on Our Lord*. Indeed, the elaborate characterization of Death in Ephrem's descent poems seems to be one of the earliest surviving examples of Christian personification of Death from late antiquity. The descent poems also differ from the *Mêmrâ on Our Lord* in depicting Death's domain—the underworld. Of course, Christian accounts like Ephrem's drew upon broader traditions to imagine and describe Death and its realm. How, if at all, did Ephrem's poems connect to ancient representations of the underworld?

Ancient accounts of people descending to the underworld and returning to tell the tale can be found in sources as old as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and book 11 of the *Odyssey*.[47] More contemporaneous with Ephrem, examples of visionary descents to the realm of the dead survive from Orphic, Jewish, Christian, and Zoroastrian traditions in late antiquity.[48] Religious texts purporting to describe the underworld were widespread among the religious movements of northern Mesopotamia, likely in Ephrem's own lifetime.[49] Mani, for instance, according to the Coptic *Kephalaia*, claimed to have visited both heaven and hell.[50]

Unlike ancient tours of the afterlife found in Christian texts like the *Apocalypse of Peter* and the *Apocalypse of Paul*, Ephrem's poems do not claim to be visionary accounts. They do not include a heavenly "guide" (as is typical in such texts) who leads an excursion through hell, nor do they describe torments experienced by various categories of sinners.[51] We find none of the specific allusions to broader Greco-Roman depictions of the afterlife common in apocryphal Christian sources—no references to the "abyss," "Tartarus," the "River Styx," or other geographical features associated with Hades appear in these poems.[52] In

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47 See the survey of Ancient Near Eastern, Iranian, Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian "descent" narratives in Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 9–48.

48 Though I call them *descents*, many writers in antiquity imagined the realm of the dead as *above* the earth, somewhere in the sky or lower heavens. My use of the term "descent" is simply a shorthand for these visionary journeys to the place of the dead. See Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 9.

49 For the Sasanian context, see Paul Dilley, "'Hell exists, and we have seen the place where it is': Rapture and Religious Competition in Sasanian Iran," in *Mani at the Court of the Persian Kings: Studies on the Chester Beatty Kephalaia Codex*, ed. Iain Gardner, Jason D. Beduhn, and Paul Dilley (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 224–235.

50 See Dilley, "Rapture and Religious Competition," 215–217, for translations from the *Kephalaia* and discussion of the text.

51 For these characteristics, see Martha Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 1.

52 See Outi Lehtipuu, "Eschatology in Early Christian Apocrypha," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Apocrypha*, ed. Andrew Gregory and Christopher Tuckett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 349–350.

all these respects, Ephrem's poems are fundamentally different from ancient "pagan," Jewish, and Christian descent narratives. Unlike such texts, they do not serve a "revelatory function" in unveiling the details of the underworld's landscapes and inhabitants to a living audience.[53]

Among Syriac Christians, the place of Death was known as *Sheol*, a term drawn from the Hebrew Bible. Ephrem imagines Sheol as a "cold and dark" kingdom (*Nis.* 36.14), a cavern (*Nis.* 41.13) where Death sits on his throne (*Nis.* 38.1), a place where the corpses of the dead lie in heaps (*Nis.* 36.3).[54] But Ephrem's descriptions of this dark and gloomy scene are—typically for his writings— quite spare. Where some other early Christian writers delighted in narrating the horrors of the afterlife, Ephrem offers little to satisfy audience members curious to imagine the realm of the dead. As Jeffrey Wickes observes, Ephrem stands out among late antique poetry for his rather compressed and minimalistic use of visual description.[55]

Ephrem's larger theological understanding of death and the afterlife also shapes his portrayal of Sheol. In his view, Sheol is not a place of punishment, but of sleep, characterized by silence and peace. Ephrem makes this parallel between death and sleep quite clear on numerous occasions. Satan's response to Death in one of the precedence dispute poems (*Nis.* 53) is a representative example:

> [*Nis.* 53.5] The body's dead state is but a sleep, lasting for a time:
> do not imagine, Death, that you are [really] death, for you are like a
>   shade.[56]

Ephrem's strong theological commitments to the fundamental unity of body and soul and the bodily eschatological resurrection made it very difficult for him to hold to any sort of post-mortem, pre-resurrection consciousness of the soul.[57] Unlike other early Christians at the time who were beginning to develop theologies of post-mortem judgment, Ephrem maintained that Sheol was simply a place or state in which body and soul await the resurrection. This theological framework helps to explain a unique feature of Ephrem's descent narratives

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53   Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 28.
54   For a thorough account of Ephrem's cosmology (including Sheol), see Buchan, *"Blessed is He who Brought Adam from Sheol"*, 28–60.
55   Wickes, *Bible and Poetry*, 86.
56   ܗܘܐ ܓܘܫܡܗ ܕܡܘܬܐ ܕܡܟܐ ܗܘ ܠܐ ܤܟ ܙܒܢܐ ܗܘ ܠܐ ܬܤܒܪ ܡܘܬܐ ܕܐܢܬ ܡܘܬܐ ܤܒ ܕܛܠܠܐ ܐܢܬ (ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 76; trans. Brock and Kiraz, *Ephrem the Syrian*, 157).
57   Frank Gavin, "The Sleep of the Soul in the Early Syriac Church," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 40 (1920): 103–120, especially 104–105.

when compared to other late antique Christian texts like the *Gospel of Nicodemus*. Because Ephrem did not envision conscious existence in Sheol, his poems could not grant speaking roles to Adam, the patriarchs, or others among the righteous dead in the underworld. The surprising absence of the very early idea of Jesus preaching to the "spirits in prison" (1 Pet 3:19), in Ephrem's narratives of the descent, is comprehensible for the same reason.[58]

Style also distinguishes the dialogue poems included in the *On Nisibis* cycle from early Christian apocryphal narratives of Christ's descent to the underworld. Ephrem's poems are loosely connected in style and theme, but do not compose a continuous narrative, unlike what some have argued.[59] *Nis.* 36, for example, is a self-contained story of Death's boasting, humiliation at the hands of Jesus in Sheol, and subsequent repentance. In the poems that follow (37–39), Death is once again bragging about his power. Finally, *Nis.* 41 contains yet another account of Jesus' descent to Sheol (this time involving Satan and his minions as well as Death).

The lack of narrative progression in this group of poems connects to a larger point about the collection and transmission of Ephrem's *madrāšê*: we cannot assume that the cycle of *madrāšê On Nisibis* was a creation of Ephrem himself or a unified composition.[60] As I have argued elsewhere, it is better to conceive of this material as a collection of different poems composed at different times and brought together in a single cycle, for reasons of thematic similarity.[61]

In summary, Ephrem's dialogue poems on Jesus' descent to Sheol are unique in several respects. First, like later versions of the descent narrative, they uti-

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58   See Buchan, *Blessed is He who has Brought Adam from Sheol*, 168–169.

59   Most strikingly, Jouko Martikainen and A.S. Rodrigues Pereira both imagine the entire *Hymns on Nisibis* cycle as a unified theological reflection by an elderly Ephrem in Edessa. (Jouko Martikainen, "Some Remarks About the Carmina Nisibena As a Literary and a Theological Source," in *Symposium Syriacum, 1972: Célebré dans les jours 26–31 Octobre 1972 à l'Institut Pontifical Oriental de Rome*, ed. Ignatius Ortiz de Urbina, OCA [Rome: Pontificium Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1974]; A.S. Rodrigues Pereira, *Studies in Aramaic Poetry (c. 100 BCE–c. 600 CE): Selected Jewish, Christian and Samaritan Poems*, Studia Semitica Neerlandica [Assen: Van Gorcum, 1997], 113.) See also Ellen Muehlberger, "Negotiations with Death: Ephrem's Control of Death in Dialogue," in *Shifting Cultural Frontiers in Late Antiquity*, ed. David Brakke, Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis and Edward Jay Watts (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2012), 352.

60   Besides the extant sixth- or seventh-century manuscripts of the *madrāšê* from Deir al-Surian, the surviving evidence for the early transmission of Ephrem's *madrāšê* (from Philoxenus of Mabbug and the index of melodies discovered at Sinai) reveals that variant, though related, forms of *madrāšê* cycles were circulating even at a fairly early date. We cannot with confidence assert that Ephrem had a hand in the editorial process. See Hartung, "Authorship and Dating," 307–308.

61   See Hartung, "Authorship and Dating," 302–309.

lize speeches-in-character, but focus entirely on the perspective of the "villains" (and especially Death). Second, though they describe a descent to the underworld, they do not describe Sheol and its denizens in any significant detail (as do other accounts of underworld journeys from antiquity—Christian or otherwise). For another, Ephrem's distinctive theological perspective on the nature of death (rejecting any concept of post-mortem consciousness) shapes his portrayal of Sheol and the characters within it. Finally, though these poems appear together in a single collection (*On Nisibis*), they are only loosely connected to one another and lack a coherent narrative arc.

3.2   *Ephrem's Descent Poems in Rhetorical and Literary Context*

These imaginative and often-humorous poems provide valuable insights into the ways in which Ephrem adapted exegetical and theological themes for a public audience. I am convinced that Ephrem's use of the technique of speech-in-character here is not simply a curiosity. Rather, it is a performative and pedagogical tool that is essential to the message of the poems. The inclusion of humor and conversations between characters of course raises the question of how and when such poems would have been performed. Were they sung in a formal liturgy, or perhaps in a Paschal vigil or procession, either inside or outside the church building?[62] Did different voices recite the different parts? Did performers employ gestures for dramatic effect, as was common in ancient theatrical performance and oratory?[63] Unfortunately, most of these questions must remain unanswered. Yet they should not remain completely absent from our analysis. In what follows, I will situate these poems in their literary context, as far as this is possible given the large gaps in the evidence.

By employing imaginative invented dialogue, Ephrem's work comes into contact with the rhetorical techniques of late antique Greco-Roman rhetorical education (*paideia*) and the training exercises preserved in its handbooks (*progymnasmata*).[64] One of the rhetorical exercises outlined in the handbooks is personification (*ethopoieia*) or characterization (*prosopopoieia*). Some ancient rhetoricians distinguished these from one another—with the latter being applied to non-human characters—while others treated the two words

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62   Gerard Rouwhorst has recently suggested public processions as an alternative performative context for Ephrem's *madrāšê*. See "The Original Setting of the Madrashe of Ephrem of Nisibis," in *Let Us Be Attentive! Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of the Society of Oriental Liturgy* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2020).

63   See Aldrete, *Gestures and Acclamations*; Webb, *Demons and Dancers*, 64–66, 74–77.

64   See the collection of translated texts by George A. Kennedy, *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric* (Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature: 2003).

as synonymous.[65] The general idea in both cases, however, was to compose a speech or part of a speech in the voice of someone else. Quintilian, writing in Latin at the end of the first century, summarizes quite well how Greco-Roman teachers of rhetoric conceived of speech in character exercises, their scope, and their value:

> We use them [i.e., speeches-in-character] (1) to display the inner thoughts of our opponents as though they were talking to themselves (but they are credible only if we imagine them saying what it is not absurd for them to have thought!), (2) to introduce conversations between ourselves and others, or of others among themselves, in a credible manner, and (3) to provide appropriate characters for words of advice, reproach, complaint, praise, or pity. We are even allowed in this form of speech to bring down the gods from heaven or raise the dead; cities and nations even acquire a voice.[66]

That last sentence (remarking on the ability to personify gods, places, or even the dead), is particularly evocative of Ephrem's dialogue poems. To be clear, I am not claiming that Ephrem was educated in the rhetorical exercises of Hellenistic *paideia*, though it seems reasonable to presume that similar exercises might have existed in Syriac literary education at the time (yet we know nothing of what this pedagogy involved). Neither do I think that Ephrem was engaging in *prosopopoieia* exercises with these poems. However, the rhetorical manuals are unique in giving us a roughly contemporaneous reflection from the late antique Mediterranean on the act of crafting speech-in-character. Although Ephrem wrote in Syriac, he belonged to a larger cultural world which provided patterns for the imaginative construction of speech. Aelius Theon's *Progymnasmata*, for instance, advises the student of rhetoric to consider the words that will be "suitable to the speaker": the character's personality, age, social status, and gender. "Then," he writes, "one is ready to say appropriate words."[67]

65　Aelius Theon does not distinguish the two; while Hermogenes, Aphthonius, and Nicolaus do. In his *Progymnasmata*, written in fourth-century Antioch, perhaps during Ephrem's own lifetime, Aphthonius describes *prosopopoieia* as follows: "everything is invented, both character and speaker, as Menander invented Elenchos (Disproof); for *elenchus* is a thing, not a person at all; this is why this called "person-making"; for the person is invented with the character." (trans. Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 115–116). Quintilian refers to the practice as "*figura personarum*, or prosopopoiea." (Quintilian, *Inst. or.* 9.2.30; LCL 127:50).

66　Quintilian, *Inst. or.* 9.2.30–31; LCL 127:50–51.

67　Aelius Theon, *Progymnasmata* 8.115 (trans. Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 47).

In this vein, Ephrem recognizes the potential hazards of "becoming a mouth for Death" (*hwêt pûmâ l-mawtâ*) in one of his dialogue poems, for which he asks God's pardon.[68] The personification of Death in the poems contained in the *On Nisibis* cycle is quite distinct from the portrayal of Death in the excerpt from the *Mêmrâ on Our Lord* discussed at the beginning of this chapter. That "Death" does not speak, but appears more bestial in its mindless consumption. The "Death" of the dialogue poems speaks, boasts, and laments both in dramatic monologues and in dialogue with other characters. The character's "inner thoughts" come to the fore in a way that fairly represents what such a being might think and say, much as Quintilian describes regarding the characterization of opponents in speech-in-character. All of this necessitates greater attention to the task of characterization (composing the speech of the character in light of its position, personality, and other features described by Aelius Theon).

We can also view Ephrem's poems through the (perhaps overlapping) lens of the dispute and dialogue poem genres in Syriac. Over many decades of publications, Sebastian Brock has given much consideration to Syriac Christian precedence disputes and dialogue poems (of which Ephrem's are the earliest known examples).[69] The precedence dispute format (seen in Ephrem's disputes between Death and Satan, *Nis.* 52–59) represents one of the clearest links between Ephrem's Syriac literary tradition and its ancient Mesopotamian (Sumerian and Akkadian) antecedents.[70]

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68   *Nis.* 67.20 (ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 108).

69   Of particular value is Brock's five-part classification system of disputes and dialogues, to which he refers in a number of his works. Type 1 is the classic precedence dispute in alternating stanzas, and appears only in *madrāšê* (and their sub-genre, *sūgyātâ*). Type 2 is what Brock calls a "transitional form … where the two parties no longer speak in alternating stanzas, but are allocated uneven blocks of speech." Both *madrāšê* and *mēmrê* of this sort are extant. Type 3 comprises dialogue *madrāšê* with a narrative framework and no alternating pattern of speech. Types 4 and 5 are represented in narrative *mēmrê* which make the narrative framework the forefront. See Sebastian P. Brock, "Dramatic Dialogue Poems," in *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984: Literary Genres in Syriac Literature*, OCA 229 (Rome: Pontifical Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1987), 135–147, 136–138. See also Sebastian P. Brock, "Syriac Dialogue Poems: Marginalia to a Recent Edition," *Le Muséon* 97 (1984): 29–58; Robert Murray, "St. Ephrem's Dialogue of Reason and Love (HEccl 9)," *Sobornost: Eastern Churches Quarterly* 2 (1980): 26–40.

70   For more on ancient Mesopotamian dispute poems, see J.J.A. Van Dijk, *La Sagesse Suméro-accadienne* (Leiden: Brill, 1953), 39 ff., and H.L.J. Vanstiphout, "The Mesopotamian Debate Poems: A General Presentation, Part I," *Sumerologica* 12 (1990): 271–318. Van Dijk seems to have been the first to outline the common structure of the Ancient Near Eastern precedence disputes, with additions and refinement by Vanstiphout. Robert Murray offers a helpful summary of this structure in his "Aramaic and Syriac Dispute-Poems and Their

Syriac writers appear to have reworked this earlier genre into a looser, more narrative-oriented structure that was appropriate to a liturgical or para-liturgical context. Ephrem's descent to Sheol dialogues are the earliest witnesses to this literary transformation in progress (Brock's Type 3).[71] In some, different characters take turns speaking (as in *Nis.* 35), while other poems (like *Nis.* 36 or *Nis.* 37) are dominated by a single character. Given the obvious structural similarities Ephrem's poems share with the ancient Mesopotamian texts, he must have drawn upon traditions of composition that had been passed down in Aramaic education for many centuries.[72] Unfortunately, we have no direct evidence for this background. Syriac writers after Ephrem continued to develop this format, as did Greek poets, especially Romanos.[73]

Among the extant sources, the dialogue poems in the *madrāšê* cycle *On Nisibis* appear like a sudden lightning bolt, with no immediate antecedents in Christian or non-Christian literature of late antiquity. Nevertheless they bear suggestive parallels to the Greco-Roman rhetorical exercises (*prosopopoieia* and *ethopoieia*) and ancient Mesopotamian precedence dispute poems. As far as we can tell, Ephrem reworked existing traditions about the descent of Jesus to Sheol and the defeat of death in new and inventive ways by utilizing speech-in-character in a manner previously unattested. This raises the question: what were these dialogues supposed to do? Or more properly, what do the texts reveal about what was being communicated to their audiences?[74] I will return to this question at the end of the chapter, after analyzing these poems and their portrayal of the figure of Death.

Connections," in *Studia Aramaica: New Sources and Approaches*, ed. M.J. Geller, J.C. Greenfield, and M.P. Weitzman, Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). Pierre Grelot was the first to observe the common literary structure and characteristics between these hymns of Ephrem and ancient Sumerian and Akkadian dispute poems. See Grelot, "Un Poème de Saint Ephrem: Satan et La Mort," *Orient Syrien* 3 (1958): 443–452.

71   Brock, "Dramatic Dialogue Poems," 136–137.

72   The appearance of dispute poems among Jewish Aramaic texts from late antiquity hints at this broader context. See Murray, "Aramaic and Syriac Dispute Poems," 165–172.

73   For the later development of Syriac dialogue poems, especially *sugyātâ*, see Brock, "Syriac Dialogue Poems." For the question of Romanos' dependance on Syriac poetic traditions, see W.L. Petersen, "The Dependence of Romanos the Melodist upon the Syriac Ephrem: Its Importance for the Origin of the Kontakion," *vc* 39 (1985): 171–187.

74   I recognize that posing such a question risks making assumptions about the author and his writings which the texts do not warrant, which is why I shy away from speaking of Ephrem's *intentions*. However, I have reason to believe that the texts in fact *do* reveal some explicit details about their purposes at least insofar as they were rhetorically presented to the audience.

3.3   *The Forces of the "Left Side": Ephrem's Death among the Evil Powers*

Having established the qualities of dramatic dialogue poems and speeches-in-character in late antiquity, I will now consider the character of Death in the *Hymns on Nisibis*. Who is this figure, and how does he relate to the spiritual forces of evil, namely, Satan? This Death is not the unspeaking glutton of the *Mêmrâ on our Lord*, but the main character Ephrem uses to imagine Jesus' descent to Sheol and its consequences.

In *Nis.* 35, Ephrem imagines the armies of evil ("the left side")—including Satan (or "the Evil One"), Sin, Death, Sheol, and various other associates—assembling to lament their "torment" at the hands of Jesus. Ephrem portrays these figures as aligned in a common interest to defeat Jesus, but with their own distinctive characteristics and agendas. Each, in turn, relates their difficulties and worries about how to respond to Jesus, who is putting them out of business. Satan, for instance, complains: "This Jesus means idleness for me!"[75] And "What work will I find for myself?"[76] Likewise, Death laments: "I've learned fasting, which I didn't know [how to do]."[77] The poem concludes with the demons admonishing Satan for his indecisiveness. Death further argues that instead of trying to attack Jesus head on, Satan should entice Judas to betray him (stanzas 21 and 22). Throughout Ephrem's poems, his personified Death is a complex figure, sometimes associated with Satan and the forces of evil (as in this poem), but more often distinct and separate from them. Among his many roles, he disputes with Satan over who is stronger (*Nis.* 52–55); he assails Satan while protesting his own innocence and righteousness before God (*Nis.* 56–60); he rebukes humanity for excessive mourning over the dead (*Nis.* 61–64, 66); he plays the role of a skeptic in disputing with humanity over the reality of the eschatological resurrection (*Nis.* 65, 68); and he rebukes Jews (*Nis.* 67).[78]

In this section, I will show that while Ephrem's characterization of these figures is inconsistent, he tends to separate Death from the other forces of evil

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75   ܕܒܛܠܠܐ ܗܘ ܠܝ ܗܢܐ ܝܫܘܥ (*Nis.* 35.5; ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 2).

76   ܠܝ ܐܟܒܥ ܐܢܬܒܢ ܐܝܢܐ (*Nis.* 35.5; ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 2).

77   ܨܘܡܐ ܝܠܦܬ ܕܠܐ ܝܕܥ ܗܘܝܬ (*Nis.* 35.6; ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 3).

78   Scholars interested in synthesizing Ephrem's theology or arguing for a coherent narrative structure in the *On Nisibis* collection have tried to explain these inconsistencies as reflecting the shift in Death's attitude after Jesus' descent to Sheol (see, e.g., Buchan, *"Blessed is He"*, 188–190). Such a shift is reflected in a few poems explicitly represented as taking place after the descent of Jesus (*Nis.* 36–39), but is not clearly apparent in the others. The better approach is simply to recognize 1) that Ephrem uses the character of Death in different ways and for different purposes, and 2) that the *madrāšê* collection *On Nisibis* is not a coherent narrative, but a collection of various poems loosely united by common thematic features.

(especially Satan). Despite Death's arrogance and gluttony, Ephrem does not portray the character as an absolute enemy of God and Christ. Rather, Death claims to operate with God's approval: "I minister before God" (*qdem allāhâ hû mšemeš enâ*).[79] Through this distinction in characterization between Death and Satan, Ephrem further emphasizes the centrality of Death as the enemy defeated in Jesus' death. He also simultaneously undercuts that enemy by presenting Death as little more than God's subcontractor.

Death's assertion of divine sanction in the dialogue poems is related to his claims of justice and impartiality. Unlike humans, he makes no distinctions of rank, accepts no bribes, and is untouched by corruption. No one has ever managed to avoid his clutches by appealing to high position or power, as he exclaims at the beginning of *Nis.* 38:

> [*Nis.* 38.2] Everyone complains greatly against me,
> but I have only complained against one.
> Who among human beings acts justly like me?
> Has payment come close to my honesty? I am fond of everyone,
> and whoever hates me knows [it]! In all my days, I do not know
> the meaning of a bribe. Before kings I have not accepted [one].
> I preach equality,
> for I make the slave and his master equal in Sheol.[80]

Affirmations like this one attest to the quite different roles played by the characters of Death/Sheol and Satan in Ephrem's dramatic dialogue poems on Jesus' descent to Sheol. As Gary Anderson observes, while most early Christian accounts of the descent make little differentiation between Death and Satan, Ephrem draws clear distinctions between the two characters and their responses to Christ: "Death confesses, Satan rebels. Where one sees his own error by dint of God's light, the other remains blinded by his ignorance."[81]

By clearly delineating between the figure of Satan and that of Death, Ephrem echoes some of the earliest streams of Christian tradition. In the first two centuries, Satan and the powers of evil were often associated with the air (as in Eph

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79 *Nis.* 38.3 (ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 19).

80 ܚܠܦ ܚܕ ܗܘ ܦܚܠ ܫܝܕ ܐܘ ܐܢܐ ܡܢ ܣܓ ܦܚܠܗ ܚܠܣܘܕ ܐܚܕܗ ܚܬܕ ܐܢܬܐ ܕܟܬܕ ܘܟܘܗ،
ܐܘܚܠܬܗ ܪܚܬܐ ܠܗܙܝܘܗܘܗ، ܐܢܬܐ ܚܠܕ ܪܝܬܪ ܐܢܬܐ ܐܘܕܦܢܬܐ ܠܕ ܗܘ ܐܕܟ ܐܬܕ ܠܟ ܐܬܕ ܐܢܬܐ ܡܢ ܗܘܬܪ ܐ ܚܘܣܘܐ ܚܕܗ ܬܬܬܒ ܒܠܟܐ ܠܟ ܠܦܚܕܗ ܐܕܬ ܚܕܗܚܙܘ̈ܐ ܚܘܗܘܬܐ ܐܕܠܚܕܘܐ ܘܚܕܗܗ (ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 19). Cf. *Nis.* 36.5.

81 Gary A. Anderson, "The Fall of Satan in the Thought of St. Ephrem and John Milton," *Hugoye* 3, no. 1 (2000): 3–27.

2:2), while the realm of the dead was usually—though not always—imagined to be situated in the underworld.[82] This is probably why, as I noted above, Death/Hades/Sheol was the prominent adversary Jesus was thought to have faced in his descent to the underworld. Satan would not have been present in the underworld, nor was he believed to have authority over the dead. That role would belong to the personification of Death or the personification of the underworld itself (Sheol or Hades). In Ephrem's poems, we find something of a middle ground between the earlier and later conceptions. Death and Sheol are always present in the underworld, sometimes claiming to act on God's behalf, and sometimes boasting of their power over Jesus along with the forces of evil. At times, they play an adversarial role toward Satan (who is occasionally present in Sheol), while at other times, their interests appear to be aligned.

In *Nis*. 36, a dialogue poem which narrates Death's response to Jesus' descent to Sheol, Death submits to God following the revelation of Jesus' power at his descent (breaking the tombs of Sheol and leading forth the dead).[83] The implications of Death's reaction to Jesus were likely clear to Ephrem's audience: the power of mortality is limited; it is under God's authority. Furthermore, Death's promise to give up all of his captives at the future resurrection offers a consoling reminder of the temporary nature of death and Sheol.[84] The character of Satan, by contrast, shows no signs of remorse in any of Ephrem's monologues and dialogues.

As he continues to react to Jesus' descent to Sheol, Ephrem's Death also highlights the disparities between the actions of the righteous people of the Old Testament (like Moses, Aaron, Phinehas, and Joshua), who brought many people down to Sheol, and Jesus, who brought the dead out of Sheol.[85] Unsurprisingly, Death prefers the former examples. He contrasts the "just wars" (*qarrābê kênê*) of the prophets with the "compassion and mercy" (*ḥnānâ w-raḥmê*) of Jesus.[86] For Ephrem, however, such a contrast necessitates a refutation of the Marcionite bifurcations of "grace" and "justice" and the Old and New Testaments.

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82   Later, however, Satan would almost universally be located at the center of the earth (the underworld). Jean Daniélou speculates that Satan's eventual association with the underworld strengthened the imagined connection between the figures of Death and Satan (*Theology of Jewish Christianity*, 247).

83   See *Nis*. 36.16–17, 38.6.

84   See *Nis*. 36.17, 38.5–6.

85   E.g., the contrast between Moses and Jesus (*Nis*. 39.4): "Moses sent the living down [to Sheol], but Jesus has resurrected and brought up the dead" (ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 23–24). See also the contrasts between Phinehas and Jesus (*Nis*. 39.5,7), between Aaron and Jesus (39.6), and between Joshua and Jesus (39.9).

86   *Nis*. 37.9 (ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 17).

He thus makes the character of Death into an anti-Marcionite spokesman, one who decries the notion that these differences between the actions of God's justice and grace would imply that Jesus is a "Stranger."[87] Echoing other common themes of Ephrem's anti-Marcionite polemic, Death insists that only the creator could bring life to the dead that he created.[88] Death challenges anyone who preaches "that there are many gods" (*d-ʾît allāhê saggîê*)—the Marcionites, in Ephrem's polemic—to realize that they will end up in Sheol and learn their mistake. "I know one God," Death proclaims, "and I acknowledge his prophets and apostles."[89]

The distinction between the characters of Death and Satan becomes especially evident in Ephrem's precedence dispute poems between the two (*Nis.* 52–59).[90] These poems are true precedence disputes of the ancient Mesopotamian model, with the two characters speaking in alternating blocks of dialogue. While there are stylistic similarities between *Nis.* 35–42 and *Nis.* 52–68 (all of which involve Death and/or Satan as characters), we cannot assume that the disputes between Death and Satan are related to Jesus' descent to Sheol. Ephrem says nothing about the temporal setting of the debates.[91] Nevertheless, the difference in the characterization of the two figures is instructive.

The debates of the first few poems have no obvious winner. Ephrem portrays both Death and Satan as self-absorbed villains who are too busy insulting one another to see their looming defeat at the hands of Jesus. In the latter poems (*Nis.* 57–59), though, Satan emerges as the true enemy of humanity, since Death is only an instrument of God, whose defeat is assured. Death relentlessly attacks Satan, with the audience members as grateful spectators. In *Nis.* 58, for example, Death blames Satan for the events of the crucifixion. Walking through the events of the Passion narrative, he promises that each would paradoxically redound on Satan. Satan's only response to these charges is to dismiss

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87   *Nis.* 37.9–11.

88   *Nis.* 37.11.

89   ܐܝܬ ܚܕ ܐܠܗܐ ܝܕܥ ܐܢܐ \ ܘܠܢܒ̈ܝܘܗܝ ܘܠܫܠܝ̈ܚܘܗܝ ܐܘܕܐ ܐܢܐ (*Nis.* 37.11; ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 18).

90   The precedence dispute between Death and Satan seems to have been a popular subject in later Syriac literature as well. Two other anonymous disputes have survived, one in a West Syrian liturgical manuscript, and another in an East Syrian. The latter dispute has been published, with German translation, by G.J. Reinink, "Ein syrisches Streitgespräch zwischen Tod und Satan," in *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Mediaeval Near East: Forms and Types of Literary Debates in Semitic and Related Literatures*, ed. G.J. Reinink and H.L.J. Vanstiphout (Leuven: Departement Oriëntalistiek, 1991), 135–152.

91   Jouko Martikainen, however, goes so far as to situate these hymns "during the stay of Christ in Sheol," reflecting his larger contention that the Nisibene cycle should be understood as a unified whole. See Martikainen, "Some Remarks about the Carmina Nisibena," 350.

Death's claims as "idle talk" (*baṭlānâ*).[92] Introducing this particular debate, the poet also lays the blame for Jesus' death entirely on the shoulders of Satan, with no mention of Death's role in the drama: "And on behalf of our Lord, [Death] spoke while cursing / the one who was the cause of his disgrace and crucifixion."[93]

This is not the only example from Ephrem's writings in which he assigns Satan full culpability for the suffering and death of Jesus.[94] Ephrem's willingness to seamlessly shift the narrative villain from Death to the Evil One shows that poetic flexibility and sensitivity to the topic of the particular poem allowed him to reshuffle aspects of the drama of Jesus' death in quite different ways. Indeed, Ephrem's desire to blame the devil makes sense, given his inherited distinction between the figures of Death and Satan (with one operating under divine sanction and the other working consistently in opposition to Jesus and the faithful). In these poems, Death occupies an ambiguous position—sometimes aligned with the Evil One, and sometimes opposed to him; claiming God's sanction but also reacting with surprise to his defeat at Christ's hands.

3.4   *Death's Boasting and Defeat:* Nis. *36 and* Nis. *41*

The primary characteristics of Ephrem's personified Death are his arrogance and insatiable hunger. Both attributes communicate the inescapable, all-encompassing reach of mortality. Both, indeed, are on display in the two dialogue poems that portray Jesus' descent to Sheol—*Nis*. 36. and *Nis*. 41. In what follows, I will examine the characterization of Death and the narrative of the descent to the underworld in these two poems. As I will show, while the two accounts are similar in some respects, they recount quite distinctive versions of the descent, and portray Death's response to that event in different ways.

The first portrayal of Jesus' descent to Sheol appears in *Nis*. 36. Here, Death takes center-stage, boasting for ten stanzas about his power to Jesus as he stands at the gates of Sheol. Death points to his almost-perfect track-record with humanity (Enoch and Elijah excluded)[95] and scoffs at the idea that Jesus will be any different: "I alone have conquered many / and the Only-Begotten seeks to conquer me!"[96] As the personified Death tells it, he is an all-conquering force, overcoming priests, prophets, kings, warriors, and even the righteous,

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92   *Nis*. 58.22 (ed. Beck, *Nis*. II, 89).

93   ܘܣܠܩ ܚܢܝ ܐܪܝܒ ܗܘܐ ܟܕ ܠܥܠ ܒܪ \ ܠܩܒܐ ܗܘܐ ܘܡܘܬ ܕܠܟ ܥܠܝ ܡܪܝܙ ܘܩܦܣܘܗ (*Nis*. 58.2; ed. Beck, *Nis*. II, 87).

94   I will discuss several examples of this phenomenon in the following chapter.

95   See *Nis*. 36.7–8.

96   ܐܪܟ ܚܠܘܡܝ ܪܗܢܐ ܠܦܬ̈ܠܟܐܪ \ ܘܣܝܕܐܪ ܚܟܐ ܕܢܪܢܕ (*Nis*. 36.4; ed. Beck, *Nis*. II, 10).

and aided by a never satiated Sheol: "Rivers of corpses are hurled by me into Sheol, and however much they pour into her, she is [still] thirsty."[97]

He invites the dead Jesus to come and look at the terrifying spectacles of his domain, which include the corpses of the most powerful figures of biblical history: Samson, Goliath, and Og. He boasts to Jesus: "see how I've heaped them up in [all] the corners of Sheol."[98] Death's incessant bragging provides the knowing audience with some ironic comedy at his expense, as he remains boastfully ignorant of what is to come. In one such instance that must have surely been intended as humorous, Death describes going through and checking his records just to be certain no living thing had ever escaped him. Throughout the first ten stanzas of this poem, Death continues his boasting: his power extends over all life, from animals to humanity, and from the wicked to the righteous. All, he says, are his "prey" (*naḥšîrîn*).[99]

In the face of such universal power and authority, Death sees little reason to be concerned with something like Jesus' crucifixion. "How will your cross conquer me? / For look: through wood I have prevailed and conquered until now!"[100] Of course, Ephrem's audiences would have recognized the thinly-veiled foreshadowing in Death's arrogance, notably his misplaced confidence in the "wood" of the cross. Finally, in stanza 10, Death challenges Jesus to show him more than "words" (*mellê*) promising a resurrection. He wants a "pledge" (*rahbûnâ*) now to show the reality of that promise.[101] This challenge sets the stage for the climactic moment that will reveal Death's weakness, when Jesus demonstrates his power in Sheol:

> [*Nis.* 36.11] Death finished his mocking speech,
> and the voice of our Lord thundered in Sheol.
> He cried aloud and tore open the tombs one by one.
> Death was seized with trembling. In Sheol, which had never been lit up,
> rays flashed from the Watchers who entered and brought forth
> the dead to meet the Dead One who gives life to all.
> The dead went forth, and the living were put to shame,
> for they thought they had conquered the one who gives life to all.[102]

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97 ,ܗ ܝܡܟܐ ܚܦ ܡܚܣܢܡܕ ܐܬܚܘ ܐܠܘܣܚ ܡܚܪܙ \ ܐܬܕܓܪ ܐܬܚܘܡܢ (*Nis.* 36.4; ed. Beck, *Nis.* II, 10).

98 ܐܠܘܣܚ ܠܕ ܡܚܣ ܐܬܘܬܝܐܘ ܐܡܘ (*Nis.* 36.3; ed. Beck, *Nis.* II, 9).

99 *Nis.* 36.9. Cf. *Nis.* 41.14.

100 ܪܡܐܠ ܡܝ ܐܢܕܘܚܘ ܐܝܣܘܝ ܐܡܣܣܚ ܐܪܕܙ \ ܐܡܘ ܠܕ ܐܟܐ ܣܚܡ ܐ ܝܚܣܡܐ (*Nis.* 36.9; ed. Beck, *Nis.* II, 11). Cf. *Nis.* 41.13.

101 Ed. Beck, *Nis.* II, 12.

102 ܐܬܡ ܚܡ ܐܠܝܐ \ ܐܡܚܘܡ ܐܟܡܘܘ \ ܐܠܘܣܚ ܡܚ ܪܚܙ ܠܡܐܬܕ ܐܢܬܠܡܘ \ ܐܡܣܚܕ ܡܠܓ ܐܬܗܘܘ

In this stanza, the raising of the dead at Jesus' death (Matt 27:53–53) shapes Ephrem's portrayal of the descent to Sheol and its significance. This is most evident in the choice of language: Jesus' dying "voice" (*qālâ*) "tore open" (*ṣarrî*) the "tombs" (*qabrê*) and "the dead" (*mîtê*) "went forth" (*npaq[w]*). These parallels make it clear that Ephrem is representing the descent to Sheol and the Matthean account of the raising of the dead as interconnected. Here, the splitting open of the tombs and the raising of the dead become visible demonstrations of Jesus' victory over Death and Sheol.[103] And Ephrem makes his own dramatic additions to the biblical scene: the illumination of the darkness of the underworld, the angelic Watchers liberating the captives of Sheol, and Death trembling in fear.

Until this moment in the poem, Death's seemingly endless speech had been met by silence from Jesus. The poem has us imagine that Jesus is present in Sheol (Death speaks directly to him), but he is not given voice as a character (here or in any other of Ephrem's dialogue poems). This portrayal has more in common with earlier references to the descent narrative in which Jesus is bound in the underworld before breaking free than with later versions in which he storms the gates of Sheol by force (though there are elements of that notion here with the invasion of the "watchers").[104] At this stanza, though, Jesus is finally no longer silent, as his voice "thunders" (*rʿem*) through Sheol. This choice of words is probably an echo of the traditional poetic imagery of thunderstorms Ephrem frequently associates with the month of April and the Paschal feast.[105]

Another version of Jesus' victory in Sheol appears with more narrative context in *Nis*. 41. The first part of the poem is primarily a monologue by Satan and, to a lesser degree, a dialogue with various other powers of wickedness. Death appears later in the poem, in a more bestial form reminiscent of the gluttonous monster of the *Mêmrâ on our Lord*. He lurks in a cave and speaks of his hunger to consume Jesus to replace his loss of Lazarus, "whose taste I still have in my mouth."[106] Following Jesus' death, Satan and his soldiers arrive

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ܣ. ܣ.ܐ ܡܩܛܝܢ ܠܬܚܬܝܐ ܐܪܥܘܣܝ ܐܬܗܐ ܐ̄ܘܡܝܪ ܕܡܚ ܡܚܬܡܐ ܠܟ ܢܣܐܐ ܕܗܝܡ ܠܟ ܐ̄ܗܬܡܐ ܡܗܙܡܐ ܩܘܡ ܚܣ ܐܠܬܡܟ ܡܢ ܚܢܛܐ ܕܚܠܗ ܐܬܗܬܘܝܐ ܐܬܩܘܡܗ ܡܗܪܚܡ ܡܗ ܐܘܩܚܗ ܐܬܝܐ ܐ̄ܬܝܐ ܕܠܚܠ ܐܪܘ ܐ ܢܓܡܗ ܬܬܝܣܐ ܠܐ ܐܬܝܐ ܡܠܘ (ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 12).

103   In *Azym.* 4.6, Ephrem contrasts Jesus' "hidden" victory over Satan at the crucifixion with his "visible" conquest of death: "Many saw that the tombs were torn open, / but they did not see that Satan was defeated" (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 8; trans. Walters, *Unleavened Bread*, 28).

104   See Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 42. For this early view, he references *Odes of Solomon* 17.10, *Teachings of Silvanus* 110:14–16, and Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 5.21.3.

105   I will discuss this imagery in greater detail in chapter 6.

106   ܒܦܘܡ ܡܟܝܠ ܛܥܡܗ ܡܟܐ ܐܘܗ ܠܘܚܡ (*Nis.* 41.13; ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 36).

at the gates of Sheol to see the corpse of Jesus and celebrate this turn of events with Death, who is portrayed here as Satan's coconspirator. Instead, they find Death consumed by grief at the dead who had come to life at the sound of Jesus' dying voice. Attempting to comfort Death, Satan tries to put a positive spin on the situation: "You have not lost as much as you have gained: / as long as Jesus is in your grasp / everyone who has lived and is living will come into your hands."[107]

Ephrem's audience was, of course, aware of the ironic reversal awaiting the two villains. The Evil One, maintaining his overconfident attitude, persuades Death to open the gates of Sheol so that they could taunt the dead Jesus. The unjustified self-assurance of the characters leads to a great reversal of fortune once Death unlatches the gates. The "radiance of our Lord's face" (*zîwâ d-parṣûpâ d-māran*) shines forth from the open gates, dissolving them entirely.[108] This account is reminiscent of the "fishhook" motif discussed earlier in the chapter. The dead Jesus lies in wait for Death and Satan to open the gates of Sheol and only then springs the trap, revealing himself in power.[109]

These two accounts of Jesus' victory in Sheol (*Nis.* 36 and *Nis.* 41) are clearly distinctive versions of the story.[110] *Nis.* 36 compresses the raising of the dead at the voice of Jesus and Jesus' own resurrection into a single moment following Death's boasting in Sheol. After this, the poem continues with Death lamenting his misfortune. He is alone—Satan and other characters are nowhere to be found. In *Nis.* 41, on the other hand, Satan is the primary character, with Death only playing a supporting role. Interestingly, this is the only poem on Jesus' descent to Sheol (*Nis.* 36–42) in which Satan appears and speaks. *Nis.* 41 also separates the event of the raising of the dead from Jesus' resurrection, unlike the account in *Nis.* 36. When Satan and his minions arrive in Sheol to mock Jesus (who is still in the grave), they find Death grieving—the raising of the dead has already occurred. *Nis.* 41 then ends on a dramatic note, with Jesus dissolving the gates of Sheol. The characters do not respond to the event, as Death does in *Nis.* 36 (and the three following poems). It would be a mistake to try to construct a coherent narrative out of these two versions of the descent, as Martikainen does when he argues that they should be seen as two

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107 ܕܠܐ ܐܘܒܕܬ ܐܟ ܐܝܟ ܡܐ ܕܐܬܝܬܪܬ \ ܟܠ ܕܚܝ ܘܕܚܝܐ ܐܝܟ \ ܐܝܠܝܢ ܒܐܝܕܝ̈ܟ ܐܟ ܢܐܬܐ ܡܠܝܩܡ ܐܝܟ ܗܘ ܕܚܒܝܫ ܒܟ
ܝܫܘܥ (*Nis.* 41.15; ed. Beck, *Nis.* II, 36).

108 *Nis.* 41.16 (ed. Beck, *Nis.* II, 36).

109 The image of Jesus destroying the gates or "bars" of Sheol also appears in *Odes of Solomon* 17.10.

110 Gary Anderson likewise makes this point, noting the "atemporal" character of Ephrem's accounts of the descent. (Anderson, "The Fall of Satan," 21).

connected theological climaxes of the descent narrative (the first correlating to Jesus' descent to Sheol and the second to his ascent from Sheol/resurrection).[111]

The noteworthy differences between these two versions of Jesus' descent to Sheol attest once more to Ephrem's flexibility as a writer. His interest was not to write a definitive account of the descent to Sheol, or even to align these two versions with one another. Rather, the episode of the descent to Sheol offered a relatively clean canvas for Ephrem's poetic artistry. While Ephrem drew upon longstanding traditions to imagine the basic details of the event and its characters, he had a great deal of freedom to portray the story and its two main villains. The best way to think of these two poems on the descent of Jesus to Sheol is that each offers a different window on Jesus' post-mortem triumph—one from the perspective of Death and the other from Satan's point of view.

Despite their differences, however, the poems share several commonalities. First, as I have already noted, both accounts center the characters of Death and Satan in a way not found in any other narratives of Christ's descent to the dead from late antiquity. Second, neither poem truly portrays Jesus' descent to the dead as a forceful invasion (as seen in the *Gospel of Nicodemus* and other later traditions). In *Nis.* 41, while Jesus destroys the gates of Sheol, this happens only after he lies dead in the grave. Finally, Ephrem's descent poems say nothing about Jesus preaching to the dead, a suprising omission given the prominence of this theme in other early Christian sources.[112] It is possible Ephrem was simply unaware of that tradition (I have found no references to it elsewhere in his writings). Alternatively, Jesus preaching to the dead may simply have not fit Ephrem's focus on the characters of Death and Satan in these poems.

Nis. 36 and *Nis.* 41 offer distinct, though similar, retellings of Jesus' descent to Sheol. In both, Jesus encounters Death personified, a figure who is arrogant due to his power and hungry to consume the bodies of mortal beings. In both, too, Death reacts with sorrow at his defeat by Jesus.

3.5   *The Great Reversal: Death's Reflections on His Defeat*

If there is an overall theme that links Ephrem's descent dialogue poems (*Nis.* 36–41) it is the depiction of Jesus' death as a grand reversal for the personified figure of Death. The poems go beyond describing the events of Jesus' tri-

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111   Martikainen, *Das Böse und der Teufel*, 86.

112   Richard Bauckham identifies three motifs in the early Christian treatment of the descent to Hades—1) Christ preaching to the dead; 2) Christ leading the righteous dead out of Hades; and 3) Christ overcoming the powers of death/Hades. The latter two are central to Ephrem, but the first does not appear. As early sources for this motif of preaching to the dead, Bauckham mentions, e.g., *Gospel of Peter* 41–42, Ignatius, *Magnesians* 9.2, Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 4.27. See *The Fate of the Dead*, 40.

umphant descent to Sheol, and dwell on the disparity between Death's past experiences and his current suffering in light of Jesus' descent. Death's defeat prompts the character to reflect. In this section, I will explore how Ephrem imagined Death's response to Jesus' death.

At the moment of Jesus' triumph in Sheol in *Nis.* 36, Death laments and mourns his loss: "The death of Jesus is a torment to me; / myself, I prefer his life more than his death."[113] This is a line rich with irony—the personification of Death, having boasted incessantly of his ability to overcome all people, now opts to see Jesus remain alive. Moreover, a figure distinguished by his ability to afflict all the living with suffering speaks of enduring "torment" at the hands of the dead Jesus.

Ephrem depicts Death's sudden reversal of fortune in vivid, sensory language. The gluttonous Death once "feasted" in Sheol, but now, Jesus "seizes our own bread from our mouths."[114] Death's belly is now empty, because "Jesus forced me to vomit up everything I have eaten!"[115] When Jesus was pierced by the lance, it was really Death who suffered and "wailed" (*maylal*).[116] Death's empty belly, unsatisfied hunger, and bodily pain "render into speech the visceral effects of Christ's descent into the underworld," as Frank puts it.[117] The "body memory" of the characters of Death and Sheol, she notes, offers a unique perspective from which Ephrem's audience could view the events of the biblical narratives.[118]

Ellen Muehlberger interprets the grand reversal for Death in these poems through the lens of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. The abject is one who is cast off and made an object of disgust because they do not fit "normal" categories of human experience. As Muehlberger sees it, the character of Death, like the city of Nisibis in the earlier poems in the *On Nisibis* cycle, experiences abjection—in this case at the hands of the dying Jesus, himself an abject.[119] She writes: "Like an encounter with that which is abject, Death's encounter with Jesus leaves him feeling out of sorts, off, not himself—empty and fragile."[120] Although I disagree with her larger premise regarding the literary coherence of the *Madrāšê on Nisibis*, Muehlberger's use of abjection

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113 ܡܘܬܗ ܕܝܫܘܥ ܠܝ ܥܘܪܟܝ ܗܘ \ ܘܐܢܐ ܛܒ ܠܝ ܚܝܘܗܝ ܡܢ ܡܘܬܗ (*Nis.* 36.13; ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 12).

114 ܘܠܚܡܐ ܕܝܠܢ ܡܢ ܦܘܡܢ ܚܛܦ ܠܗ (*Nis.* 39.3; ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 23).

115 ܝܫܘܥ ܗܘ ܐܠܨܢܝ ܕܐܬܝܒ ܟܠ ܕܐܟܠܬ (*Nis.* 39.18; ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 28).

116 *Nis.* 39.7; ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 24.

117 Frank, "Death in the Flesh," 74.

118 Frank, "Death in the Flesh," 64.

119 Muehlberger, "Negotiations with Death," 26.

120 Muehlberger, "Negotiations with Death," 33.

theory is nevertheless valuable for making sense of Ephrem's characteriza-
tion of Death following Jesus' descent to Sheol. Death's power is undone,
and his ability to fulfill his basic functions is broken. Death's belly is empty,
and his "treasury" vacant, all at the hands of a single dead man.[121] When we
see Ephrem's Death confronting his circumstances after his defeat by Jesus,
he is a true abject, his perspective on himself and the world turned inside
out.

Throughout *Nis.* 39, Death constantly expresses his sadness and fear at
events that challenged his status quo, while recalling his gluttonous delight at
the episodes in the Old Testament that had resulted in many deaths. This entire
poem revels in the parallels between Old Testament "symbols" and their New
Testament counterpoints, especially those in the gospel Passion narrative. Such
an emphasis would otherwise be unremarkable, but coming from the mouth of
the vanquished Death, it takes a darkly comical turn:

> [*Nis.* 39.2] It was fine with me when they were symbols,
> but not now that the dead have rebelled and conquered me![122]

Death now recognizes the significance hidden within the biblical language and
events, seeing his own downfall within them: "I have plunged into waves of his
symbols," he laments.[123] In *Nis.* 39.8, he recounts a conversation between Jesus
and the Sadducees regarding "life from the dead."[124] In Death's telling, only he
understood Jesus' "hateful expression" which made him very sad, though at the
time he did not fully recognize its import:

> [*Nis.* 39.8] It was fine with me when these were [only] words,
> but he had not showed me the life of the dead in action.[125]

Elsewhere in the poem, Death describes himself as afraid of Aaron's censer,[126]
Phinehas's spear,[127] and Elisha's bones,[128] referring to episodes in the Old Tes-

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121   See *Nis.* 38.1: "My throne was set for me in Sheol, / and one dead man (ܡܝܬܐ) arose, and
      hurled me from it" (ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 19).
122   ܟܠܝ ܒܣܡ ܠܝ ܗܘܐ ܟܕ ܐܝܬܝܗܘܢ ܗܘܘ ܐܪ̈ܙܐ \ ܘܠܐ ܗܫܐ ܕܡܪܕܘ ܡܝ̈ܬܐ ܘܙܟܐܘܢܝ (ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 23).
123   ܛܒܥܬ ܒܓ̈ܠܠܝ ܐܪ̈ܙܘܗܝ, ܒܓܘ (*Nis.* 39.17; ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 27).
124   Mark 12:26–27 et par.
125   ܒܣܡ ܠܝ ܗܘܐ ܟܕ ܡ̈ܠܐ ܗܘܝ ܗ̈ܘܝ, \ ܘܠܐ ܒܥܒܕܐ ܚܘܝ ܚ̈ܝܐ ܕܡܝ̈ܬܐ (ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 25).
126   *Nis.* 39.6.
127   *Nis.* 39.7.
128   *Nis.* 43.4.

tament that in some way upset the balance between the living and the dead.[129] The raising of the dead at Jesus' death is, of course, the event Death finds most alarming. Next to the censer of Aaron, Death exclaims, "the cross makes me even more afraid / for it has torn open the tombs of Sheol!"[130] Similarly, the rock opened for Moses because it feared his glorious authority, but the tombs were "torn open" in Sheol for Jesus merely at his death.[131] In the face of the victory of Jesus in Sheol, Ephrem renders the dreadful and all-powerful specter of Death as a cowering weakling.

In Ephrem's descent dialogue poems (especially *Nis.* 39), Death's reaction to his defeat by Jesus is alternately humorous and tragic. The character becomes an inversion of all that Ephrem's audience would expect of him from tradition and their own personal experiences. Death the glutton is left hungry and Death the all-powerful is rendered powerless. This great reversal would have offered a unique perspective on the event of Jesus' death and the paschal season during which it was celebrated. Rather than dwelling on the event of Jesus' resurrection, Ephrem presents the paradox of a dying Death, told from Death's own perspective.

3.6 *Sheol Weeping for Her Children:* Nis. *37*

In *Nis.* 37, Ephrem shifts the focus from Death to a different character: Sheol. Throughout this poem, Ephrem personifies Sheol as female, which further enables the poet to draw upon stereotypical female actions in late antiquity (childbirth and ritual lament) to construct this character. In casting Sheol in these female roles, Ephrem is able to reverse expectations—Sheol is a "mother" who "gives birth" to the dead who leave her womb at Jesus' death, and weeps at lost them. Her mourning plays upon the expected female act of lament, but inverts it, as she laments for the loss of the dead who return to life. Her excessive grief also serves as a kind of anti-exemplar, a warning against mourning for the dead without the hope of the resurrection.

Because the noun *Sheol* is feminine in Syriac, personifying the realm of the dead as female is a natural choice. Indeed, Ephrem elsewhere alludes to the feminine personification of Sheol by speaking of its "womb."[132] This idea of the realm of the dead as a womb containing many children informs the characterization of Sheol in this poem. Ephrem portrays her as a reversal of how he

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129 Ephrem imagines Death's reactions to these events in several other poems as well. See, e.g., *Nis.* 43.4, 53.13.

130 ܡܘܠܟܢ ܘܩܝܣܐ ܚܝܠܗ ܚܠܨܗ ܠܝ \ ܐܢܙܪ ܡܝܬܐ ܡܚܝܬܐ ܕܒܥܡܩܐ (*Nis.* 39.6; ed. Beck, *Nis.* II, 24).

131 *Nis.* 39.21 (ed. Beck, Nis. II, 29).

132 See, e.g., *Res.* 3.11.

imagines typical human female behavior—grieving at barrenness and rejoicing in childbirth. By contrast, Sheol, "the barren and cold womb" (*l-ʿûbâ ʿaqrâ w-qarrîrâ*) did not want to give birth to her children, because she did not want to let them go. Ephrem compares her pain in childbirth to that of Rebekah, then goes on to describe it in more detail:

> [*Nis*. 37.2] How great then was Sheol's pain,
> when new pangs struck her:
> the dead awoke, broke out and came forth from her belly.[133]

Once again, Ephrem is evoking the raising of the dead at Jesus' death (Matt 27:52–53). For Sheol, this violent and painful experience of childbirth leaves her a "barren womb." Ephrem parallels her empty womb with the virgin womb of Mary: both gave birth to Christ, though unlike Mary, Sheol did not want to (*Nis*. 37.4).[134] The image of Sheol weeping and lamenting what she lost should be situated in the context of mourning as a gendered act in the late antique Near East and Mediterranean. "Weeping" and loud cries were particularly associated with female mourning rituals. In Greek antiquity, for example, we find a distinction between the feminine forms of mourning (θρῆνος, γόος, and κομμός), historically associated with wailing and/or dirges by hired women and female relatives of the dead; and the masculine ἔλεγος and ἐπιτάφιος λόγος, understood in antiquity to be solemn speeches in praise of the dead given by men.[135]

Included among the techniques of personification taught in Greco-Roman rhetorical *paideia* were long-established strategies by which male orators were taught to perform tropes of stereotypically "female" speech. One such model of female speech in character was the mourning woman. Ephrem's contemporary, the rhetorician Libanius, who lived and taught in Syrian Antioch, compiled a book of *progymnasmata* exercises that included a number of sample speeches-in-character (*prosopopoieia*), including female characters, among which we find several speeches modeling female lament, including Andromache's lament over the body of her dead husband Hector and others on the

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133 ܡܛܠ ܡܐ ܕܝܢ ܕ ܟܐܒܗ ܢܥܨܘܗ̈ ܘܢܩܘܡ ܪܘܥܐ ܐܪܬܬ ܢܡܬ̈ ܕ ܐܢ̈ܫܐ ܪܚܘܩܘܗ̈ ܘܢܦܩܘ ܣܩܬ ܡܘܬܘܪܝܐ\ܕ ܐܢ̈ܫܐ\ (ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 15).

134 See Frank, "Death in the Flesh," 64.

135 See Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 102–108. For a summary of the structure of ritual laments, see Angela Standhartinger, "'What Women Were Accustomed to Do for the Dead Beloved by Them' ('*Gospel of Peter*' 12.50): Traces of Laments and Mourning Rituals in Early Easter, Passion, and Lord's Supper Traditions." *Journal of Biblical literature* 129, no. 3 (2010): 559–574, 561–562.

topic of Niobe weeping for the loss of her children.[136] Once again, it is impossible to make a direct connection between Ephrem and Greek rhetorical education, but these sources offer contemporaneous parallels, revealing that the female mourner character was one that was frequently evoked in the training of budding male orators in late antique Syria.

Ephrem makes his characterization of Sheol as a female mourner quite explicit when describing her sorrow at the raising of Lazarus. He presents her as a counterpoint to Lazarus's mourning sisters Mary and Martha, who "wept for him when he entered the grave." Conversely, Sheol says, "I wept for him when he went forth."[137] Ephrem's audience can imagine the two bereaved women standing and lamenting at the tomb—undoubtedly a familiar sight in late antique Mesopotamia—but also the bereaved female figure of Sheol mourning at the gates of the underworld as Lazarus departed. The gendered characterization of Sheol as a female mourner allows Ephrem to evoke a well-known female activity (funerary lament) and the literary stereotypes by which it was portrayed. If, as Jacob of Serugh attests, Ephrem directed female choirs to sing his poems, it is possible that a female voice sang the part of Sheol when this poem was performed, adding an element of realism to the underworld's gendered lamentation.

In the latter stanzas of *Nis.* 37, the speaker becomes more ambiguous. Given the continued focus on lament here (and the gendered quality of lament in late antiquity), I am inclined to think that the voice is still that of personified Sheol. It is also possible, though, that Death may be speaking, since Sheol is sometimes referenced in the third person. If Death (portrayed by Ephrem as masculine) is in fact the speaker, then the character appears to blur the lines of acceptable male mourning. The raising of the dead at Jesus' death (Matt 27:52–53) brings Sheol/Death particular anguish, as it forces them to contemplate its future ramifications: the complete emptying of Sheol at the coming resurrection of the dead.

> [*Nis.* 37.8] See how this suffering I inflict
> on people through those they love,
> will, in the end, gather itself completely on me!
> For when the dead have left Sheol, there will be a resurrection for every-
>   one,

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136   Ed. and trans. Craig A. Gibson, *Libanius's Progymnasmata: Model Exercises in Greek Prose Composition and Rhetoric* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 361–363, 380–385.

137   ܕܐܢܬ̈ܘܗܝ ܬܡܪ ܗܪ ܟܗܠ \ ܠܡܬܙܐ ܡ̇ܪܬܐ܂ ܘܐܪܐ ܚܒܝܒܗܘܢ ܗܪ ܢܦܩ (*Nis.* 37.6; ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 17).

but for me alone, torment. And who could bear
all of this for me? For I will see Sheol left alone,
because that voice which has split the tombs,
will render her desolate and send out the dead within her![138]

Regardless of the speaker, the alliterative wordplay in the first line (*hānâ ḥāšâ d-hâ maḥḥeš*) serves to accent for the audience the feeling of despair. Once again, Ephrem draws upon the events of Matt 27:52–53 to demonstrate both the present victory of Jesus over death at the time of the Passion and the future "desolation" of Sheol at the final resurrection. He uses the language of the one to envision the other: the same "voice that split the tombs" will ultimately "send out"[139] the "dead" from Sheol to their resurrection. Death and Sheol, by contrast, will suffer the fate people typically imagined for the dead—to suffer, to experience agony, to be bereft and empty.

We can also interpret Sheol's performance of mourning in this poem as a kind of anti-exemplar. Ephrem is highly critical of excessive mourning for the dead throughout his writings. In several poems, he has the personification of Death explicitly condemn the practice, casting it as a useless exercise that does not adequately demonstrate confidence in the reality of the future resurrection.[140] At the beginning of one such poem, the poet explains that Death is annoyed by the racket of mournful wailing: "My brothers, see how Death, king of silence, complains / that we have filled his dwelling with the wailing of despair."[141] The mourning of Sheol in *Nis.* 37 mirrors that of grieving humans, but unlike them, she is truly without hope, because her loss of her children is a permanent one. By contrast, Ephrem continually emphasizes in his many *madrāšê* on the future resurrection that the separation of the dead from their living loved ones is temporary. "Who could think," Ephrem asks in *Nis.* 70, "regarding death, that sleep lasts forever?"[142] Only a fool, he answers. Indeed, the person who acquires an "eye of hope" (*ʿaynâ d-sabrâ*) is able to truly see death's end, the dawn at the end of that sleep—the resurrection.

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138   ܐܠܐ ܣܛܪ ܕܝܢ ܐܢܐ ܒܠܚܘܕ ܐܢܐ ܐܘܠܨܢܐ \ ܘܡܢܘ ܟܝ ܢܬܚܣܝܢܝ ܠܣܝܘܠ ܚܠܐ ܗܘ ܓܝܪ ܠܗ ܠܥܠܡ \ ܘܗܟܢ ܪܚܝܡܘܬܗ ܣܓܝܐܗ ܠܥܠܡ ܠܒܠ ܐܝܟ ܗܘ ܗܘܐ ܢܘܣܟܐ \ ܐܠܐ ܚܠܣܘܗܝ ܓܘܡܐ ܘܗܟܢ ܗܪ ܘܘܩܒܝܢܐ ܠܗ \ ܘܗܘ ܩܠܐ ܕܐܝܟ ܐܝܢܐ ܕܗܐ ܥܩܪ ܠܗ ܠܩܒܪܐ ܕܐܪܝܡ ܢܣܝܦܬ \ ܚܒܝܒܬ ܠܗ ܘܡܣܩ ܫܟܒܐ ܕܒܟܪܣܗ (ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 17). Cf. *Nis.* 39.21.

139   Echoing the first word of Matt 27:53: ܢܦܩ.

140   *Nis.* 61–64, 66, 70.

141   ܗܐ ܚܙܘ ܐܚܝ ܟܡܐ ܪܛܢ ܡܘܬܐ ܡܠܟܐ ܕܫܠܝܐ \ ܕܡܠܝܢܢ ܒܝܬܗ ܒܝܠܠܬܐ ܕܚܫܐ (*Nis.* 61.1; ed. Beck, 96).

142   ܡܢܘ ܢܣܒܪ ܥܠ ܡܘܬܐ ܕܫܢܬܐ ܗܝ ܕܠܥܠܡ ܩܝܡܐ (*Nis.* 70.17; ed. Beck, 115).

Sheol's mourning, by contrast, is without hope, and thus offers a model of how not to respond to the experience of death.

4   Ephrem's Audiences and the Performance of Death

Before concluding this chapter, we ought to consider what Ephrem might have wanted his audiences to glean from personifying Death, Sheol, and Satan in the context of telling the story of Jesus' descent to Sheol. The framing elements of these dialogue poems (the introductions and conclusions of individual poems) offer a few hints of the performative context and the main themes within which Ephrem situates the poems. When these framing elements are included (they do not appear in every dialogue poem in the *On Nisibis* cycle), the poet speaks directly to his audience and/or to God, introducing the contents or drawing some kind of conclusion from them. These sections provide the clearest understanding of what priorities Ephrem sought to communicate to his audiences through utilizing these personifications. The conclusion of *Nis.* 36 is one of the most relevant examples for this purpose:

> [*Nis.* 36.18] Our living King has ascended
> from Sheol as a conqueror.
> He has multiplied woe to the left side:
> sorrow to spirits and demons; pain to Satan and Death;
> mourning to Sin and Sheol. Today, joy has come to
> the right side! So on this great day,
> let us give great glory to the one
> who died and lived to give life and resurrection to all![143]

In Ephrem's evocation of "this great day," we find one of the only clear clues for the original performative context of this poem.[144] The rising of the king, Jesus, from Sheol is the focal point of "this day," which is also a day to "give glory" for the events of Jesus' death and resurrection. This rare piece of evidence indicates that the performance of the poem originally accompanied the

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143 ܚܠܡ ܢܟ̈ܐ ܘܝ ܘܐ̈ܬܘܟܝܠܐ | ܚܒܬ ܢܥܒܐܠ ܚܝܝ ܘܚܢܐ | ܗܘ ܠܟܒ̈ܐ ܘܡܫܟܠܟ ܚܒ ܗܘܐ | ܐܘ̈ܟܐ ܘܟܬܪܐ ܘܗܘܕ ܠܡܗܠܟ ܥܟ | ܐܠܡܟܠ ܘܗܘܕܐ ܚܘܟ ܐܘܬܐ ܠܟܒܐ | ܡܚܟܢܟ | ܘܡܟܢܐ ܗܘܐ ܚܡ̈ܐ ܥܟܐ ܙܙ ܡܗܠܠ | ܚܘܕܟܐ ܐܟ ܠܟܠ ܡܥܐ ܘܐܬܘܕܬܐ | ܠܐ ܠܗܕ ܠܐ ܠܕܘܬܕ | ܕܡܚܬܐ ܘܡܪܐܟܠ (ed. Beck, *Nis.* II, 14).

144 Notably, Aphrahat uses almost the same expression (ܗܘܐ ܝܘܡܐ ܪܒܐ) to describe the Christian paschal feast in *Dem.* 12.5 (ed. Parisot, vol. 1, 516).

celebration of the Easter festival. Of course, we cannot be certain that this was true for the other descent dialogue poems (which lack such allusions), but it would be a reasonable supposition. Perhaps public performances of these poems were staged as part of a vigil on the night before the Paschal feast, as Romanos employed similar poems a century and a half later in Constantinople. In such a case, the emphasis on the empty stomachs of the characters of Death and Sheol could have accentuated the hunger pangs of the faithful who were about to break their long fast with the celebration of the festival.[145] The imagery of empty bellies, and conversely, gluttonous eating, might have literally evoked visceral responses from Ephrem's audience.

Ephrem's portrayal of the descent of Jesus to the realm of the dead is distinguished by the characters who dominate the action and dialogue. Jesus is silent, as are the righteous denizens of the underworld whom he liberates. Instead, we hear of these events and reflect upon them from the perspective of Death, Sheol, and Satan. This begs the question: what could have been the purpose of this literary choice? Model speech-in-character exercises preserved in late antique rhetorical handbooks may offer a helpful point of comparison. Ellen Muehlberger observes that while such exercises could potentially speak in the voice of any imaginable character, "[i]n practice, though, it seems that students were most frequently directed to study characters in tragic or terrible situations."[146] This comment is suggestive when we consider Ephrem's dialogue poems, which focus on moments of considerable crisis and tragedy for the characters of Death and Satan. Perhaps this common preference for speeches-in-character by figures dealing with distressing situations reflects the kinds of speeches that were broadly popular at the time and were most frequently performed by orators in public settings. We could then speculate that Ephrem composed his descent dialogue poems to play on this expectation from his audiences.

Of course, we cannot say for certain. And indeed, the parallel between Ephrem's dialogue poems and the model *prosopopoieia* exercises is an imperfect one. Beyond their use of speech-in-character, Ephrem's poems bear little resemblance to sample speeches from late antique rhetorical handbooks. Further as Muehlberger also argues, the model *prosopopoieia* exercises appear to be designed to offer moral guidance to the students who were encouraged to write speeches in character. By imagining themselves in the situations faced

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145   I have drawn this idea from Georgia Frank's observations about Romanos' dialogue poems.
       ("Death in the Flesh," 68).

146   Ellen Muehlberger, *Moment of Reckoning: Imagined Death and its Consequences in Late
       Ancient Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 131.

by characters like Niobe, they could also imagine how the tragic events might have been avoided (in her case, by avoiding prideful boasting).[147] Ephrem's descent dialogue poems, by contrast, emphasize the inevitability of the defeat of Jesus' enemies. There was no moral choice that Death could have made to avert his fate. Death, Sheol, and Satan are not figures whose suffering evokes empathy from the writer and his audience, but rather scorn and delight. This inversion could have promoted the celebratory, triumphant mood befitting the festal context of the poems' performance.

In such a context, we can also understand these poems as "vehicles of theology," to use Sebastian Brock's phrase. In Brock's view, the dialogue poem was an ideal medium for Syriac authors to explore ambiguities in the Christian message, problematic passages from Scripture, and "the state of disjunction between God and the world."[148] Ephrem's poems involving the personifications of Death, Sheol, and Satan explore a particularly significant "moment of tension"—the very moment of Jesus' death.[149] This instance was charged with significance for early Christian worship and theology, but it also demanded imaginative expansion.

As we have already seen, Ephrem drew upon tradition and his own imagination to portray the moment of Jesus' death as a great defeat for Death, a moment in which Death's gluttony got the better of it. Yet with the exception of the tombs breaking open and the dead being raised (Matt 27:52–53), the Gospel lections for the festival would have been silent on the details of Jesus' descent to Sheol and defeat of Death. Narrating this story from the perspective of the personified character of Death enabled Ephrem to expand upon the theological ambiguity of Jesus' crucifixion. Through the boasting, humiliation, and eventual submission of this character, Ephrem reminded his audience that while death is unavoidable, Christ has overcome it by his death; subject to God's power, death will eventually come to an end. Such a message, again, fits quite well in the context of a Paschal celebration or pre-festal vigil.

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147   Muehlberger, *Moment of Reckoning*, 135–136.

148   Sebastian P. Brock, "Dialogue Hymns of the Syriac Churches," *Sobornost: Eastern Churches Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (1983): 35–45, 41–42.

149   I am borrowing this phrase from Kristi Upson-Saia's article about biblical-oriented dialogue poems in Syriac. Similar to Brock, she argues that such poems center upon a "moment of tension" in the narrative or a particular theological ambiguity. See Upson-Saia, "Caught in a Compromising Position: The Biblical Exegesis and Characterization of Biblical Protagonists in the Syriac Dialogue Hymns," *Hugoye* 9, no. 2 (2006): 189–211.

5   **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I sought to show how Ephrem expanded upon traditions sur-
rounding the death of Jesus and his descent to the underworld by personifying
Death and framing Jesus' death as a confrontation with that figure. In empha-
sizing the role of "Death" as the enemy overcome by Jesus, Ephrem followed the
earliest Christian traditions of Christ's descent to the dead. Though it is impos-
sible to account for the precise cords of tradition that linked Ephrem to earlier
imagery and ideas, it is clear that he was an adept adapter of well-established
Syriac Christian notions of Jesus' struggle with Death and descent to Sheol. He
utilized the rhetorical tool of personification and the emerging Syriac dramatic
dialogue genre to bring these events before his audiences, transforming earlier,
vaguer traditions of the descent into full-fledged narratives, with a personi-
fied Death as his starring character. In the dramatic dialogue poems of Jesus'
descent to Sheol (*Nis*. 36–42), he used this character's perspective to tell the
story of the descent and reflect on its significance.

Over the course of this chapter, I demonstrated once again how the perfor-
mative character, poetic form, and occasional nature of Ephrem's writings were
constitutive elements of their message. In this case, Ephrem's inherited tradi-
tions shaped how he imagined Jesus' conflict with Death and descent to the
underworld. Yet he was not a passive recipient of traditional theological motifs.
Adapting this narrative to the format of the *madrāšâ* genre and to public per-
formance in a festal context, he drew upon a rich vein of late antique rhetorical
and theological conventions to bring Death to life.

Dramas of Jewish Rejection: Jews and the Death of Jesus in Ephrem's Theological Imagination

1 Introduction

Ephrem's vehement anti-Jewish polemic is undoubtedly one of the most controversial aspects of his literary and theological legacy. The tone of his rhetoric is often unnerving:

> [*SF* 3.349] Flee from such a one, weakling;
> your death and your blood mean nothing to him!
> He was happy to accept the blood of God.
> Will he shy away from yours?[1]

In this excerpt from one of the *Mêmrê on Faith*, the "People" (ʿammâ) appear unequivocally responsible for the death of Jesus, portrayed in stark terms as "the blood of God." The earlier lines of this *mêmrâ* depict Jews as "so frenzied on blood / that they could not refrain from killing." Both examples imagine Jews as relentless enemies representing real threats to Christians.[2] These sorts of accusations (that Jews are "deicides" and "Christ killers") should be familiar to readers acquainted with the long and painful history of anti-Judaism and antisemitism among Christians.

The task of this chapter is not to rehearse all of these passages, nor to provide a comprehensive analysis of anti-Jewish polemic in the works of Ephrem, an effort which Christine Shepardson has undertaken with great thoroughness and skill.[3] Rather, I am interested here in the more limited question of how Ephrem imagined the role and fate of Jews in the suffering and death of Jesus. Engaging with this question is essential to understanding the many ways in

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1　ܚܙܘܩ ܡܢ ܟܐܢܐ܂ ܡܚܝܠܐ܂ ܕܡܘܬܟ ܘܕܡܟ ܠܐ ܚܫܝܒ ܠܗ ܥܠ ܗܘ ܕܨܒܐ ܩܒܠ ܕܡܐ ܕܐܠܗܐ܂ ܕܕܝܠܟ ܢܬܟܚܕ (*SF* 3.349–352; ed. Beck, *SF*, 30; trans. adapted from Andrew Hayes, *Metrical Discourses on Faith by the Blessed Mar Ephrem*, Eastern Christian Texts in Translation 4 [Leuven: Peeters, 2020], 58).

2　ܕܒܕܡܐ ܗܟܢ ܫܢܝܘ ܕܠܐ ܡܨܝܢ ܗܘܘ ܡܟܠܝܢ ܡܢ ܩܛܠܐ (*SF* 3.329–330; ed. Beck, *SF*, 30; trans. adapted from Hayes, *Metrical Discourses*, 57).

3　See Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy*.

which Ephrem conceived of the death of Jesus and its significance. Anti-Jewish supersessionism is central to much of his writing on this subject.

This chapter explores several case studies from different writings of Ephrem—which I call "dramas of Jewish rejection." Ephrem's anti-Judaism fits within broader trajectories of early Christian discourse, but how did Ephrem apply anti-Jewish readings of the narrative of Jesus' Passion and death in different contexts? The central contention of this chapter is that the portrayals of the "crucifying Jews" in Ephrem's theological imagination were not static, but varied, and served particular purposes within the occasional contexts of different texts. The function, and even presence, of common motifs (such as God's rejection of the Jews and election of the Gentiles, and the Jewish rejection of their Messiah) differed markedly depending on the literary genre or performative context of the source in question.

In retelling the stories of the Passion of Jesus, Ephrem assigned a variety of roles to the stereotyped figures of the Jews, from moral anti-exempla, to proto-heretics, to unwitting tools of Satan, and even recipients of divine mercy. These shifting depictions of the "crucifiers" reveal once more the dramatic and occasional nature of Ephrem's theological imagination, a point I have sought to demonstrate throughout this book. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to go beyond a simple re-narration of the themes of Ephrem's anti-Judaism to shed light on the fertile theological imagination at work in even the most distasteful elements of his reflection on the suffering and death of Jesus.

The first task of this chapter will be to situate Ephrem's anti-Jewish polemic in its context and assess how to understand it. I will then examine one particular case study—Ephrem's retellings of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem as a drama of adulterous rejection featuring the personified "Daughter Zion"—to consider how Ephrem drew upon and reimagined gospel traditions of the suffering and death of Jesus to shape the Christian identity of his audience over and against Jewish "others." In the third major section of the chapter, I will focus upon the layers of Ephrem's anti-Jewish polemic. When Ephrem attacked Jews for crucifying Jesus, who was he really speaking to, and why? Ephrem's dense, allusive style can obscure these questions, but I will consider two examples that allow us to pull back the curtain and better understand something of the reality behind his rhetoric.

Next, I will consider examples in which Ephrem rewrote episodes of the story of Jesus' Passion as supersessionist parables, with "good" characters cast as Gentiles, and "bad" characters as Jews. In these retellings, Ephrem tended to emphasize reversals of fortune: characters seen as "Jewish" intended to shame Jesus, only to see that disgrace return to them. The final section of this chapter will explore alternative portrayals of Jewish involvement in the death of

Jesus, texts in which Ephrem either completely avoided polemic against Jews or adopted a more positive stance toward them. This final analysis will lead once more to a consideration of the relationship between rhetoric and reality in Ephrem's anti-Jewish polemic in light of my larger contention that his representations of the "crucifying Jews" served particular purposes within the occasional contexts of different texts.

2 Ephrem's Anti-Jewish Polemic: Rhetoric or Reality?

My analysis of Ephrem finds its place within a much larger scholarly discourse on early Christian anti-Judaism. From a very early date, Christians (whether writing in Greek, Latin, or Syriac) turned their pens against Jews, accusing them of misinterpreting their own scripture and even killing their Messiah and God. Scholars have debated to what extent such rhetoric reflected the historical reality of a combative relationship between Jews and Christians.[4] Ephremic scholarship, mirroring the broader debate, has polarized around this question: did Ephrem's frequent and vehement polemic against Jews reflect real competition with local Jewish communities, or was it a largely symbolic discourse, intended to strengthen the internal identity of the Christian community? In my view, *both* interpretations are probably correct to some degree. The targeted appearance of Ephrem's anti-Jewish polemic demonstrates that it had particular rhetorical value, that it was useful to highlight the contrast between Christians and Jews in some texts, and perhaps not in others.

Unlike with John Chrysostom's infamous homilies against "Judaizing" Christians in Antioch, little historical evidence survives regarding the Jewish and Christian communities in Nisibis and Edessa that could help us contextualize Ephrem's polemic.[5] Chrysostom further clearly identifies the reasoning behind

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4　For an excellent summary of the scholarly debate up to the mid-1990s, see Guy G. Stroumsa, "From Anti-Judaism to Antisemitism in Early Christianity?" in Ora Limor and Guy G. Stroumsa, eds., *Contra Judaeos: Ancient and Medieval Polemics between Christians and Jews* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 1–26.

5　Han Drijvers makes an attempt to reconstruct Jewish-Christian relations in northern Mesopotamia (drawing primarily upon the early fifth-century *Teaching of Addai* and the writings of Ephrem), but his article reveals the inherent limitations to such an inquiry. Drijvers believes that the social context of late ancient cities like Edessa is crucial for understanding their religious communities: "Pagans, Jews and Christians did not live in splendid isolation in an antique town in which a good deal of life was lived in public … Ideological conflicts and struggles like those between Christians, Jews and pagans found their origin in daily experiences of different religions" (H.J.W. Drijvers, "Jews and Christians at Edessa," *Journal of Jewish*

giving these homilies—Christians participating in Jewish festivals, worshipping in synagogues, and consulting Jewish religious authorities. By contrast, Ephrem's writings reveal little about the situation that prompted the polemic.[6] Unfortunately, the quest for the historical backdrop of Ephrem's anti-Jewish polemic leaves scholars able to do little more than speculate.

Christine Shepardson's *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy* has added helpful nuance to this conversation by closely examining the literary function of Ephrem's anti-Jewish language. Shepardson argues that Ephrem's Jews were—at least in part—rhetorical constructions. Ephrem, she says, was a proponent of a specifically Nicene orthodoxy, and employed anti-Jewish rhetoric to emphasize the "otherness" of his non-Nicene opponents.[7] Such rhetoric, she argues, was more concerned with bolstering Christian identity than attacking hostile Jewish rivals. Shepardson makes her case for this reading of Ephrem by demonstrating how Ephrem "maps" the characters of biblical villains (e.g., the Pharisees) onto his subordinationist ("Arian") rivals. As she sees it, anti-Jewish language provided a template for unbelief that Ephrem employed to depict non-Nicene Christians.

Another recent study of Ephrem's anti-Jewish polemic, by Elena Narinskaya, takes a very different approach. In an effort to defend Ephrem from the charge of anti-Judaism, Narinskaya argues that Ephrem's supposed anti-Judaism was entirely rhetorical, employed as a "literary device, and not as his theological viewpoint."[8] The true Ephrem, in her view, is the author of the Old

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Studies 36, no. 1 [1985]: 88–102.) Drijvers concludes that it was precisely this real contact between Christians and Jews that was so threatening to Christian leaders like Ephrem. The strength, and even existence, of the Jewish community in Edessa was "a threat to Edessa's nascent orthodoxy" (101). This is certainly a plausible interpretation of Ephrem's polemic, but given the sources, extremely difficult to maintain as a portrait of Jewish-Christian relations in Edessa. We have some evidence of the presence of a thriving Jewish community in Nisibis during the first and second century, but not as much in the following centuries. (Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, vol. 1, 48–49).

6   For Chrysostom's homilies, see Robert Louis Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late 4th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 67–68. Even in the case of some of Ephrem's *Hymns on the Unleavened Bread*, which question the legitimacy of the Passover celebration in light of the new covenant, and present the Passover meal as a deadly poison, Ephrem does not explicitly note the occasion for this polemic. It is a reasonable hypothesis to assume that Ephrem is reacting against Christian participation in Jewish rites, but Ephrem's polemic does not provide that context.

7   Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy*, 107.

8   Elena Narinskaya, *Ephrem: A "Jewish" Sage: A Comparison of the Exegetical Writings of St. Ephrem the Syrian and Jewish Traditions*, Studia Traditionis Theologiae 7 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 46.

Testament commentaries, texts which are deeply influenced by Jewish exegetical traditions.

Although Narinskaya is right to argue that Ephrem's anti-Jewish polemic served a rhetorical and literary function in shaping the identity of his own community, it is difficult to imagine that such polemic would have had power if Christian identity was not being defined over and against Jewish identity.[9] Indeed, as Dominique Cerbelaud observed, ancient polemic tends to reflect *closeness*, rather than *distance*, between the two communities.[10] The very proximity of Ephrem and Jewish tradition (a subject key to Narinskaya's argument) could help to account for the motivation behind his anti-Jewish polemic.[11] I will respond further to Narinskaya's work near the end of this chapter, as I deal with the contrast between Ephrem's often heavily anti-Jewish *madrāšê*, and his Old Testament commentaries, which are almost entirely devoid of such polemic.

The various genres represented in Ephrem's corpus present real challenges for the study of Ephrem's anti-Jewish polemic. Unfortunately, scholarship on this question has tended to gloss over the distinctions between genres or to synthesize Ephrem's ideas into a coherent system. Yet the differences are profound: in some works, notably his biblical commentaries, Ephrem rarely polemicizes against Jews; in others, such as the *madrāšê* cycles *On Virginity* or *On Faith*, anti-Jewish polemic appears occasionally (often depending on the larger rhetorical aim of an individual hymn); and in a few texts (particularly the *madrāšê* for the paschal season) it is extremely prominent. This varied distribution of Ephrem's anti-Jewish polemic suggests that its use (like Ephrem's writings themselves) was *occasional*—dependent upon the particular context and audience of an individual poem, homily, or commentary.

In light of these developments in the scholarship, the best approach to this subject will therefore: 1) be aware of the limitations of the historical data; 2) recognize the place of Ephrem's polemic within broader early Christian trajectories; 3) pay attention to the literary function of the "Jews" in Ephrem's

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9   Narinskaya, *Ephrem, a 'Jewish' Sage*, 26–27.

10   Cerbelaud, "L'antijudaïsme," 205.

11   There is evidence of Jewish influence upon Syriac liturgical practices (Rouwhorst, "Jewish Liturgical Traditions in Early Syriac Christianity"), that the OT Peshitta originated within Syrian Judaism (Michael Weitzman, *The Syriac Version of the Old Testament: An Introduction* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999]), and that early Syriac exegesis reflects influence from targumic or midrashic traditions (Sebastian P. Brock, "Jewish Traditions in Syriac Sources," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 30 [1979]: 212–232.) If Ephrem's community also faced porous boundaries between Jewish and Christian practices, his anti-Jewish rhetoric could have been a significant source of self-definition for his Christian community.

writings; and 4) engage with the different genres, performative characteris-
tics, and possible audiences of those writings. Through a rigorous integration
of these four elements, the remainder of this chapter will shed light on the
role(s) Ephrem imagined for the Jews in his theological dramas of the death
of Jesus.

3   The Triumphal Entry: An Anti-Jewish Drama in Poetry and Prose

Throughout Ephrem's writings, especially the *madrāšê* written for the paschal
season, the biblical tradition serves as a fertile resource to shape the Chris-
tian identity of his audience over and against the Jewish "other." In what fol-
lows, I will explore one paradigmatic example of Ephrem's dramatic theological
imagination at work in shaping his audience's perception of the Jewish role in
the Passion and death of Jesus—the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.
Ephrem references and alludes to a number of biblical loci to tell the story
of the Jewish rejection of Jesus. Yet in several *madrāšê*, as well as in the *Com-
mentary on the Diatessaron*, Ephrem makes this particular event central to his
supersessionist drama. The triumphal entry thus offers a unique case study to
explore Ephrem's creative engagement with biblical motifs. How did Ephrem's
theological imagination operate when adapting a passage from the Gospel to
create a supersessionist drama?

3.1   *Dramatizing the Triumphal Entry in the* Commentary on the
        Diatessaron
The portrayal of the triumphal entry of Jesus in the *Commentary on the Diates-
saron* not only has close parallels to Ephrem's *madrāšê*, but can provide a guide
for understanding how Ephrem might have constructed those *madrāšê*. The
Commentary on the Diatessaron is a distinctive exegetical compendium, unique
among the works of Ephrem. It is formally a commentary, yet, unlike Ephrem's
commentaries on Genesis and Exodus, is not structured as a continuous inter-
pretive retelling of a single book.[12] Rather, it shifts between close examination
of exegetical questions, brief explanations of narratives or theological issues,

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12   The uniqueness of the commentary among the authentic writings of Ephrem lends cre-
      dence to Christian Lange's contention that the text is heterogeneous in nature—not com-
      posed as a unified work, but a compiled school text. Like Lange, I believe that the *Com-
      mentary on the Diatessaron* has its roots with Ephrem, but was supplemented over time
      by other authors or redactors. See Lange, *The Portrayal of Christ*, 66–68.

and reflections strongly reminiscent of the style of many of Ephrem's metrical and artistic prose texts.[13] The shifting styles of the commentary could reflect its origins as a "school" text, perhaps as the lecture notes of Ephrem's students.[14] In this context, a compilation of references and cross-references could help students, preachers, or poets to construct their own "mental concordances" based upon common vocabulary and themes.

The benefit of examining the commentary alongside Ephrem's poetic writings is that the commentary offers clear pathways of interpretation, pathways that are opaque and allusive, difficult to trace, in the *mêmrê* and *madrāšê*. The treatment of the triumphal entry in the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* and several of Ephrem's poems provides striking evidence of this. The similarities between these texts give us a useful guide to make sense of how Ephrem went about linking biblical images and references in order to craft a dramatic account of the Jewish rejection of Jesus. The relevant passage from the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* begins with a citation from the harmonized Syriac gospel text:

> *Untie the donkey and bring it to me*.[15] He began with a manger and finished with a donkey, in Bethlehem with a manger, in Jerusalem with a donkey. This is like, *Rejoice Daughter Zion, for behold your king is coming to you, just and lowly, and seated on a donkey*.[16] But [Daughter Zion] saw him and became sad. She faced him and grieved.[17]

The commentary introduces the quotation from Zechariah 9:9 (referenced in both Matthew and John's accounts of the triumphal entry) by means of a common cross-reference cue—"this is like" (*ayk hāy*).[18] This biblical citation

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13   Pierre Yousif identifies three categories of literary style in the commentary, upon which I draw here. (Pierre Yousif, "Les formes littéraires du commentaire du Diatessaron de saint Éphrem de Nisibe," in *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984: Literary Genres in Syriac Literature*, ed. H.J.W. Drijvers, R. Lavenant, C. Molenberg and G.J. Reinink, OCA 229 [Rome: Pontificium Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1987].)

14   See Sebastian P. Brock, "Notulae Syriacae: Some Miscellaneous Identifications," *Le Muséon* 108, no. 1–2: 69–78.

15   Mark 11:2; Matt 21:2.

16   Zech 9:9. Syriac text given here: ܕܘܨܝ ܣܓܝ ܒܪܬ ܨܗܝܘܢ ܗܐ ܐܬܐ ܡܠܟܟܝ ܟܐܢܐ ܘܦܪܘܩܐ ܘܪܟܝܒ ܥܠ ܚܡܪܐ.

17   ܐܠܐ ܠܗ ܚܙܬ ܘܟܪܝܬ ܐܦܝ ܠܗ ܐܦܟܬ ܥܡܗ ܐܬܟܡܪܬ ܚܙܬ ܠܗ ܥܠܝܗ ܘܟܪܝܐ ܥܠܝܗ. ܟܪܝܐ. ܗ.ܗ. ܗܘܬ ܕܘܨܝ ܣܓܝ ܒܪܬ ܨܗܝܘܢ ܗܐ ܐܬܐ ܡܠܟܟܝ ܟܐܢܐ ܘܦܪܘܩܐ. ܘܟܪܝܐ ܥܠ ܚܡܪܐ ܘܪܟܝܒܐ ܘܦܪܘܩܐ ܘܗܝ ܣܢܝܐ. ܗ.ܗ. (ed. Leloir, *Texte syriaque*, 204; trans. adapted from McCarthy, *Commentary*, 269).

18   Matt 21:5 (P): ܐܡܪܘ ܠܒܪܬ ܨܗܝܘܢ ܗܐ ܡܠܟܟܝ ܐܬܐ ܠܟܝ ܡܟܝܟ ܘܪܟܝܒ ܥܠ ܚܡܪܐ.

then provides the source for the character of "Daughter Zion," the personified representation of the Jewish people who plays a dramatic role in all of Ephrem's retellings of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The commentary then expands on the citation by describing the "Daughter's" sadness at the coming of the king, a stark contrast with the prophetic call to "rejoice" (Zech 9:9). The commentary does not, however, elaborate on the reaction of "Daughter Zion," but shifts to presenting a rapid-fire series of symbolic antitheses focused on her rejection of Jesus:

> She repaid him with evil for the immensity of his grace. The Father had washed her from her blood, but she defiled his Son with her spitting. The Father had clothed her with fine linen and purple, but she clothed him with garments of mockery. He had placed a crown of glory on her head, but she plaited a crown of thorns for him. He had nourished her with choicest food and honey, but she gave him gall. He had given her pure wine, but she offered him vinegar on a sponge.[19]

These pairs of anti-Jewish antitheses (between washing and spitting, a crown of glory and a crown of thorns, wine and vinegar, etc.) find parallels throughout Ephrem's corpus. Indeed, the repetitive, almost rhythmic quality to this passage is much more reminiscent of the style of Ephrem's poetic works than that of standard Syriac prose. Likewise, the mode of interpretation has shifted from the earlier focus upon a single passage (the triumphal entry) to a brisk series of biblical allusions, comparable to Ephrem's *madrāšê*.

The interpretation of Jesus' triumphal procession into Jerusalem in the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* shares deep parallels with Ephrem's portrayals of this event in three poems for the paschal season (*Cruc.* 1, *Res.* 3, and *Eccl.* 38). In each of these texts, Ephrem presents Zechariah's "Daughter Zion" as the personification of the Jews of Jesus' day, and the "daughter" of the original Israelites of the Golden Calf story. All of these retellings share some common dramatic "beats": Ephrem imagines that the "Daughter" "saw" (*ḥezat*) Jesus entering the city, only to respond with disappointment. *Res.* 3, *Eccl.* 38, and the *Commen-*

ܐܠܐ ܐܬܕܟܪܝ ܒܪܬ ܨܗܝܘܢ ܡܛܠ ܕܗܘܐ ܝܫܘܥ ܡܠܟ ܐܬܐ ܠܟܝ; John 12:15 (P): ܠܐ ܬܕܚܠܝܢ ܒܪܬ ܨܗܝܘܢ.

19 ܘܐܘܫܛܬ ܚܠܐ ܒܐܣܦܘܓܐ ܀ . . . (ed. Leloir, *Texte syriaque*, 204; trans. adapted from McCarthy, *Commentary*, 269).

tary on the Diatessaron even employ the same verb to describe her reaction: "she became sad" (*etkemrat*).[20] Likewise, the commentary and the *madrāšê* present the figure of the "Daughter" as ultimately responsible for all aspects of Jesus' suffering and crucifixion (including the crown of thorns, the vinegar and gall, and the purple robe), a phenomenon which I will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter. We cannot be certain of the literary relationship between these texts, but the links are obvious. The focus on the character of the "Daughter" in relation to the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, as the commentary shows, derives from the text of Zechariah 9:9, as does the motif of the "Daughter's" sadness (an inversion of the call to "rejoice" in that biblical source material).

3.2   *Dramatizing the Triumphal Entry in* Cruc. *1 and* Res. *3*

Although some of the language and imagery is similar, the poems go further than the commentary, working the motif of sadness into a larger drama in which that grief attests to the "Daughter's" propensity to adultery (typified in the Golden Calf narrative). An extended narrative drama told in the format of a *madrāšâ* provides an opening for Ephrem to elaborate on the nature of the relationship between Jesus and the "Daughter," and on the consequences of her disappointed rejection. In what follows, I will examine two of these poems (*Cruc.* 1 and *Res.* 3) in more detail. These *madrāšê* are very closely related, both in terms of their themes and in terms of their language. They are, in fact, so alike that it seems likely that one of the two was the template for the other.[21]

Both poems imagine the entry into Jerusalem as a wedding procession, in which Jesus arrived to wed "Daughter Zion."[22] In *Res.* 3, for instance, after comparing this procession with that of the Israelites coming out of Egypt, Ephrem evokes the cheering crowds of the (presumably) well-known Diatessaron Gospel account:

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20   In the face of lingering questions about the commentary's attribution to Ephrem, such close lexical and thematic parallels strongly suggest that this portion of the commentary is authentically Ephremic.

21   The following examples demonstrate the close lexical and thematic similarities between the two: *Res.* 3.4: ܗܘܐ ܚܕܘܬܐ ܩܕܡ ܚܬܢܐ ܪܒܐ ("A great procession went before the Bridegroom"); *Cruc.* 1.1: ܗܘܐ ܚܕܘܬܐ ܗܘܐ ܩܕܡ ܚܬܢܐ ("Happy was the procession before the Bridegroom"); *Res.* 3.5: ܚܙܬ ܕܢܟܦ ܘܐܬܟܡܪܬ ("She observed that he was chaste and became sad"); *Cruc.* 1.3: ܕܝܬܝܪ ܒܢܟܦܗ ܟܡܪܬ ܗܘܬ ("She was especially grieved with his chastity"); *Res.* 3.5: ܚܙܬ ܗܘ ܕܕܟܐ ܘܐܬܟܡܪܬ ܕܒܓܝ̈ܪܐ ܗܘܬ ܡܥܕܐ ("She saw that he was pure, and was grieved, for she was accustomed to adulterers"); *Cruc.* 1.3: ܕܐܝܟ ܐܡܗ ܒܓܝܪܐ ܡܥܕܐ ܗܘܬ ("For like her mother, she was familiar with adultery").

22   Or, as *Res.* 3 has it, "Daughter Sarah."

[*Res.* 3.4] Cheerful April was sent to the daughter just as to her mother
to crown daughter Sarah, and they set out to meet the Son of the king.[23]
A great procession went before the bridegroom, that the bride might
    rejoice in her betrothed.
The lame leaped like stags, the blind shone like lamps.
There were acclamations with palm branches. Blessed is he who chas-
    tened the unfaithful one![24]

The phrase "leaped like stags" (*raqqed*[*w*] *a*[*y*]*k aylâ*) follows the exact word-
ing of the Peshitta version of Psalm 114:4, a text which describes the Exodus.
There, it refers to the mountains, but here Ephrem has borrowed the language
to describe the lame who have been healed by Jesus. In the first stanza of this
poem, Ephrem echoed this passage to describe "Daughter Sarah's" departure
from Egypt: "the mountains skipped before her" (*ṭûrê qadmāyāh raqqed*[*w*]).
Such a choice of words here in the description of the scene of Jesus' entry into
Jerusalem thus strengthens the close association the poem creates between the
Exodus and triumphal entry narratives.

    The most obvious New Testament antecedent for the depiction of Jesus as
the bridegroom and the entry into Jerusalem as his wedding feast is the parable
of the ten virgins (Matt 25). This subtle allusion in *Res.* 3 is made much more
explicit in *Cruc.* 1.

[*Cruc.* 1.2] The feast and April are two brothers,
resplendent messengers of good news.
They ran and brought news to the daughter just as to her mother:
"Look! The Bridegroom is at the gate! Come out to meet him!"
She saw him, but he did not please her. She was grieved, for he was holy,
she trembled, for he was the Savior, she wondered, for he was humble.
He delayed his victorious deeds
and mixed strength with gentleness.[25]

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23   Or "and it [April] went out to meet the Son of the King."

24   ܣܘܣܐ ܢܣܒ ܐܝܙܓܕܐ ܝܪܚܐ ܐܦܪܝܐ ܥܡ ܚܕܐ / ܕܢܟܠܠ ܠܗ̇ ܠܒܪܬ ܐܝܟ ܐܡܗ ܘܢܦܩܘ
ܠܐܘܪܥܐ ܕܒܪ ܡܠܟܐ / ܘܐܙܠ ܐܙܠ ܡܪܡ ܣܕܝܪ ܐܫܝܢܐ ܕܩܕܡܘܗܝ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܬܚܕܐ/ ܟܠܬܐ ܒܚܬܢܗ̇ / ܕܠܝܨ̈ܐ
ܗܘܘ ܐܝܟ ܐܝ̈ܠܐ ܘܥܘܝܪ̈ܐ ܗܘܘ ܗܘܘ ܐܝܟ ܫܪ̈ܓܐ / ܩܥ̈ܬܐ ܥܡ ܙܝܬ̈ܐ / ܒܪܝܟ
ܕܪܕܐ ܠܟܦܘܪܬܐ (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 86).

25   ܒܕܝ̈ܩ ܢܣܒ ܐܝܙܓܕܐ ܐܠܗܝܢ ܐܚ̈ܐ / ܐܦܝ̈ܥܝ ܐܣ̈ܒܪܐ ܛܒ̈ܬܐ / ܪܗܛܘ ܘܣܒܪܘ ܠܒܪܬ ܐܝܟ ܐܡܗ̇
ܕܠܚܬܢܐ / ܗܐ ܥܠ ܬܪܥܐ ܘܬܪ̈ܥܐ / ܦܘܩܝ ܐܠܘܪܥܗ / ܚܙܬܗ ܘܠܐ ܫܦܪ ܠܗ̇ ܟܪܝܬ ܠܗ̇ ܕܩܕܝܫ
ܙܥܬ ܐܝܟܬܗ / ܕܦܪܘܩܐ ܗܘ ܬܡܗܬ ܕܡܟܝܟܐ ܗܘ / ܘܐܘܚܪ ܙܟܘܬܗ̈ܝ / ܘܚܠܛ ܚܝܠܐ ܗܘ
ܐܡ ܡܟܝܟܘܬܐ ܗܘܐ ܚܠܛ ܐܢ̈ܬ (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 42).

In this stanza, Ephrem radically reappropriates the language of the parable to fit his new narrative. For one, the message of the two messenger brothers (Passover and April/Nisan) in this stanza ("Look! The Bridegroom is at the gate! Come out to meet him!") is quite close to the Peshitta and Sinaiticus texts of Matthew 25:6.[26] We can imagine Ephrem's mental cross-referencing in action as he borrows phrasing from elsewhere in the Gospel.

Here, though, Ephrem shifts the response of the "daughter." Unlike the five foolish virgins who neglected to bring their oil in advance and missed the arrival of the bridegroom, "Daughter Zion's" rejection of the bridegroom is definite and intentional. She is "not pleased" and "grieved" by his appearance. In this retelling, the "delay" of the bridegroom, an allusion to the bridegroom's delayed arrival in Matt 25:5, becomes the deferral of "his victorious deeds" by coming in the simplicity of his humanity.[27] In these two poems, therefore, Ephrem has repurposed a parable with a clear eschatological orientation in order to narrate the Jewish people's rejection of Jesus, thus giving that rejection a strong sense of finality and cosmic consequence.

The image of the relationship between God and his people as a marriage has roots well before the time of the New Testament. Ephrem was well aware of traditions depicting the marriage of God and Israel (whom he calls "the King's bride"),[28] and which place the origins of that marriage in the giving of the Law in the wilderness.[29] In both *Res.* 3 and *Cruc.* 1, Ephrem parallels the wedding procession of the triumphal entry with that earlier wedding ceremony at Sinai. He evokes this tradition at the beginning of *Res.* 3, immediately after calling his hearers' attention to the triumphant bridal procession of the Exodus:

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26   P and S.: ܗܘܐ ܫܘܬܐ ܐܪܬܐ ܗܘܐ ܩܘܡ ܠܐܘܪܥܗ.

27   The same word "he delayed" (ܐܘܚܪ) appears in both the P and S of Matt 25:5.

28   ܟܠܬ ܡܠܟܐ. See *Res.* 3.1.

29   See, for example, Jer 2:2: "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the LORD: 'I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown.'" This passage is particularly relevant to this discussion, as it locates the bride "in the wilderness," a reference to the Exodus narrative. Rabbinic sources appear to develop this passage in depicting the gift of the Torah at Mt. Sinai as a wedding. For instance, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, commenting on Exod 19:17, writes: "*And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God.* Said Rabbi Jose: Judah used to expound: 'the Lord came from Sinai (Deut 33:2). Do not read it thus, but read: "the Lord came to Sinai," to give the Torah to Israel. I, however, do not interpret it thus, but: "the Lord came from Sinai," to receive Israel as a bridegroom comes forth to meet the bride.'" (*Mek.*, Bahodesh 3, ed. and trans. Jacob Z. Lauterbach [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1961], 306). Cf. also *Pesiqta deRab Kahana*, Piscah 1, 11.11 (ed. Jacob Neusner, *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987], 7).

[*Res.* 3.2] In the wilderness was a pure wedding feast, and on Mount
    Sinai was the bridal chamber.
The Holy One descended, betrothed, and wed the daughter of Abraham,
    his beloved.
Suddenly, a great scandal: the bride committed adultery in her bridal
    chamber!
The betrother went up to the bridegroom, and a foreigner entered the
    bridal chamber.
She hated the king, but loved the calf. Blessed is the Pure One who
    wrote to dismiss her![30]

This stanza vividly depicts "the daughter of Abraham" spurning her divine
groom at the wedding feast itself, in the very "bridal chamber" of Mount Sinai,
through the worship of the Golden Calf.[31] Ephrem's depiction of Israel's rejec-
tion of God as adultery is well-attested in the Hebrew Bible and in subsequent
Jewish and Christian tradition.[32] In both *Cruc.* 1 and *Res.* 3, "Daughter Zion's"
adulterous rejection of Jesus at the triumphal entry into Jerusalem demon-
strates, as he writes in *Cruc.* 1, that she was "stamped with the likeness / of [her]
mother,"[33] Israel, and "in lying, she [even] surpassed her mother."[34] Ephrem
clearly imagines the Golden Calf story and the crucifixion of Jesus as two paral-

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30   ܗܘܐ ܐܠܘܠܐ ܕܟܣܐ ܒܕܒܪܐ ܘܟܕܘܬܐ ܠܓܢܘܢܐ ܢܚܬ ܩܕܝܫܐ ܡܟܪ ܢܣܒ ܠܒܬ ܐܒܪܗܡ ܕܪܚܡܗ |
      ܟܕ ܒܓܢܘܢܐ ܓܪܬ ܟܠܬܐ ܣܓܝ ܣܝܢܐ | ܐܘ ܟܢܘܫܐ ܘܗܘܐ ܬܡܢ ܥܡ ܥܓܠ ܕܗܒܐ ܠܓܢܘܢܗ | ܥܡܠܐ ܕܓܢܘܢܐ ܗܠܟ (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 85).

31   For the portrayal of the Golden Calf episode as an act of adultery, see *Cruc.* 1.5,14–15; *Res.*
      3.3, *Fid.* 14.6–8, *CJ* 2.7–8; Michael E. Pregill, *The Golden Calf between Bible and Qur'an: Scrip-
      ture, Polemic, and Exegesis from Late Antiquity to Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,
      2020), 215–225. The *Mêmrâ on our Lord* is the only work of Ephrem that connects the pun-
      ishment in the aftermath of the worship of the Calf (drinking the melted gold mixed with
      water: Exod 32:20) to the test for adultery ("the waters of testing") prescribed in Num 5:11–
      31 (*SdDN* VI.2–3). Notably, a tradition preserved in the Babylonian Talmud makes the same
      connection (*b. 'Abod. Zar.* 44a).

32   The biblical prophets developed the image of *adultery* to describe Israel's unfaithfulness
      in worshipping other gods. The language of the Hebrew Bible is often very explicit: the
      Hebrew verb זנה ("to prostitute") appears on numerous occasions in reference to Israel's
      worship of other gods. Yet in the vast majority of these cases, the Peshitta renders these
      passages with the less graphic ܠܡܛܥܐ ܒܬܪ ("to wander after"), diluting the metaphori-
      cal resonance. See Exod 34:15–16 (ܠܡܛܥܐ ܒܬܪ); Lev 17:7 (ܛܥܝܢ ܒܬܪܗܘܢ); Lev 20:5–6
      (ܠܡܛܥܐ ܒܬܪܗ) Deut 31:16 (ܠܡܛܥܐ ܒܬܪ); Ezek 6:9 (ܛܥܘ and ܛܥܝܢ); Ezek 20:30 (… ܒܬܪ
      ܒܬܪܗܘܢ); Hos 9:1 (ܛܥܝܬ).

33   ܐܡܗ ܕܗܝ | ܒܪܬ ܕܡܘܬܗ ܒܕܡܘܬܐ ܕܚܬܡܐ (*Cruc.* 1.5; ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 43).

34   ܠܐܡܗ ܕܚܬܬ ܒܟܘܕܒܐ ܐܦ ܥܠܝܗ ܗܘܬ (*Cruc.* 1.3; ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 43). Cf. *Res.* 3.3–4.

lel moments of adultery, decisive moments for the dissolution of the "marriage" between God and the Jewish people.[35]

In this section, I have sought to glimpse behind the curtain of Ephrem's theological imagination by examining parallels between his retelling of the triumphal entry in the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* and several *madrāšê*. The close textual and thematic links between these sources cannot be ignored, and indeed, I argued that the commentary provides a model by which to understand Ephrem's opaque process of connecting biblical references and allusions in the *madrāšê*. Building on the Gospel reference to Zechariah ("rejoice, Daughter Zion") in the description of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem, Ephrem personified the "Daughter" as representative of the Jewish people. In *Cruc.* 1 and *Res.* 3, he drew upon other imagery from the Gospel, Psalms, and Exodus to imagine the entry into Jerusalem as a wedding procession marred by the "Daughter's" adulterous rejection of Jesus, which he portrayed as a parallel to the earlier wedding and adultery that took place at Mount Sinai with the Golden Calf.

4 Who Are the "Jews"? The Layers of Dramatic Polemic

In what follows, I will further consider the function of Ephrem's anti-Jewish retellings of the Passion narrative. I will first continue my analysis of *Cruc.* 1 and *Res.* 3, arguing that the anti-Jewish drama of these two *madrāšê* operated also as an anti-Marcionite polemic. I will then turn to the *Hymns against Julian* for a glimpse at how Ephrem framed contemporary events involving Jews in the language and imagery of the Bible, casting the Jewish "alliance" with Emperor Julian as a recapitulation of the crucifixion of Jesus. Both cases will reveal the layers of Ephrem's anti-Jewish polemic, which addressed contemporary situations in generally vague and opaque ways, often only hinting at its multivalence.

This analysis draws upon recent developments in the study of early Christian anti-Judaism (and late antique polemical discourse more broadly). Scholars have pointed to the role of polemical discourse in strengthening boundaries between "insiders" and "outsiders," between "right belief" and "error."[36] Early

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35 See Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy*, 81–91. See also Rouwhorst, *Hymnes pascales*, vol. 1, 103–105.

36 See, e.g., Lieu, *Marcion*, 7–9; Andrew S. Jacobs, "Jews and Christians," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 172–178.

Christian anti-heretical literature was not, therefore, especially concerned with fairly representing the messages of opposing groups. As such, we must read this literature with caution. This is especially the case in anti-Jewish texts, where polemic against "the Jews" often existed in the realm of abstraction. In the words of Jennifer Wright Knust, "disparaging, universalizing remarks about 'the Jews' often had little or nothing to do with actual 'Jews' at all."[37] Rather, Jews could and did serve as negative exemplars, models of "unbelief" or templates for other forms of objectionable teaching.

With Ephrem, the challenge is deepened by his tendency to blur distance between times and places by casting contemporary events and disputes in a completely biblical frame. Who, then, are the "Jews" that Ephrem imagines rejecting Jesus in favor of adulterous liaisons? Who does Ephrem speak to when he attacks these Jews? What are the specific situations that Ephrem seeks to address by blaming Jews for abandoning Jesus?

4.1   *Making the Bridegroom a Stranger*

In what follows, I will address several of these questions by returning to my analysis of *Cruc.* 1. This poem retells the story of Jesus' triumphal entry from the vantage point of the personified "Daughter Zion," linking her adulterous rejection of Jesus to her "mother's" betrayal of her divine bridegroom at Mount Sinai. Yet there is more to this polemical renarration of the Passion narrative than meets the eye. Ephrem's portrayal of "Daughter Zion's" role in the crucifixion of Jesus is thoroughly shaped by an attempt to invalidate Marcionite Christianity.

As Shepardson argues, Ephrem "maps" the Jews of biblical history (e.g., the Pharisees) onto his subordinationist rivals, in order to delegitimize them and promote pro-Nicene Christianity as normative. One of the most striking examples of this sort of polemic discussed by Shepardson is *Fid.* 87. In this *madrāšâ*, Ephrem describes his opponents as "the new People."[38] Through their incessant "investigation" and "inquiry" into the nature of God, they stir up "controversy" (*ḥeryānâ*), which Ephrem calls a "hidden cross" (*zqipâ kasyâ*), enacting a "second Passion" (*ḥāšâ d-trên*) at the instigation of Satan.[39] Commenting on this text, Shepardson argues that, "[i]n Ephrem's depiction, through the Christians' subordinationist inquiries Satan reenacts the Passion that took place at the

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37   Jennifer Wright Knust, "Early Christian Re-Writing and the History of the Pericope Adulterae," *JECS* 14, no. 4 (2006): 485–536, 492.

38   *Fid.* 87.9 (ed. Beck, *Fid.*, 269).

39   *Fid.* 87.19 (ed. Beck, *Fid.*, 270).

hands of the Jews … Ephrem's opponents emerge from these texts as assailants and abusers of God's Son."[40] By linking his theological adversaries to the supposed crucifiers of Jesus, Ephrem depicts his contemporary opponents as hostile to Christ himself.[41]

Shepardson identifies an important aspect of Ephrem's larger tendency to re-contextualize biblical narratives and bring their characters, images, and themes into his own contemporary context. Ephrem's Jews often function as templates of unbelief, negative exempla through which he can either encourage his audiences to right belief or behavior, or negatively portray contemporary ecclesial rivals.[42] While she intentionally limits this part of her project to Ephrem's anti-"Arian" polemic in the *Hymns on Faith* and *Mêmrê on Faith*, I believe we can employ similar methods to detect polemics against other "heretical" antagonists, namely Marcionites.

In *Cruc.* 1, Ephrem levels yet another accusation against "Daughter Zion"— that she treated Jesus as a "stranger" (*nûkrāyâ*), and preferred an actual "stranger" in place of him. The appearance of the word "stranger" in both cases is a cue to the presence of a multi-layered polemic. In the third stanza, for instance, Ephrem writes:

> [*Cruc.* 1.3] She knew that there was no pretext that could conquer his purity,
> Except one: to say "he is a stranger."
> Craftily she blasphemed
> her betrothed to serve foreigners.[43]

Two major accusations are at play in this excerpt. The initial, surface level accusation is that "Daughter Zion's" choice to identify Jesus as a "stranger" was an intentional rejection, an inversion of the wedding imagery (rooted in biblical tradition and the parable of the ten virgins), which pervades the poem. The second allegation is that "Daughter Zion" chose "foreigners" (*gîyûrê*) in place

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40   Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy*, 129.

41   This recalls the anti-"Arian" polemic of Athanasius, as memorably summarized in *Ep. fest.* (Syr.) 10.9 (Cureton 49.27–50.4, 11–12, quoted in David Brakke, "Jewish Flesh and Christian Spirit in Athanasius of Alexandria," *JECS* 9, no. 4 [2001]: 453–481, 470): "ungrateful opponent of Christ, entirely wicked, the killer of his Lord, blind in his soul's eye, and a Jew in his mind."

42   See Wickes, *Bible and Poetry*, 101–103.

43   ܒܝܕܥܐ ܕܠܐ ܐܝܬ ܗܘܐ ܥܠܬܐ ܕܬܙܟܐ ܠܕܟܝܘܬܗ \ ܐܠܐ ܚܕܐ ܕܬܐܡܪ ܢܘܟܪܝܐ ܗܘ \ ܓܘܢܐܝܬ ܓܕܦܬ \ ܠܡܟܝܪܗ ܕܢܫܡܫ ܓܝܘܪܐ \ ܠܓܝܘܪܐ (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 45).

of Jesus.[44] In this context, "stranger" and "foreigner" are synonymous terms, as in stanza 5: "She held her betrothed as a stranger, / and mocked her bridegroom as a foreigner."[45]

The "Daughter's" dual mistake (treating Jesus as a "stranger" and choosing a "stranger" in his place) appears far more significant when we consider Ephrem's frequent attacks on Marcionite Christian theology. As we have seen in previous chapters, the Marcionite sect was a significant force in northern Mesopotamia well into the fourth century, and was a frequent target of Ephrem's polemic. Ephrem was deeply critical of Marcionite teachings, particularly the identification of Christ with another God, the "Stranger." One of Ephrem's prose *Mêmrê Against Marcion* exemplifies his negative assessment of this aspect of Marcionite thought. He writes: "How therefore can you liken Jesus to that Stranger, who is strange to him in every respect? And [why] do you wish, on the other hand, to account him strange to the Maker when he is like him in every respect?"[46] This idea of the "likeness" of the Father and the Son represents a basic principle of Ephrem's understanding of the Godhead, as presented in the *Hymns on Faith* and *Mêmrê on Faith*. In his polemic against subordinationist Christologies, Ephrem argues that the Son is fundamentally *like* the Father, and therefore the two should not be set in any kind of opposition to one another.[47] The category of *strangeness*, of an essential antithesis between Creator and Stranger, therefore runs deeply contrary to Ephrem's own theological commitments.

When viewed in this context, *Cruc.* 1 emerges as a dramatic, if subtle, critique of the Marcionite identification of Jesus with the Stranger. It links this aspect of Marcionite theology with the Jewish rejection of Jesus at the time of his Passion and death.[48] The nuances of this critique are lost on the modern reader, but would have been striking in the context of fourth-century Mesopotamia.

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44 This final word of the stanza is challenging to interpret. The manuscript reads ܢܘܟ̈ܖܝܐ ("foreigners," "aliens"), but Beck's edition corrects the Syriac to ܓܝ̈ܖܐ ("adulterers"). As I have argued elsewhere, I think Beck's reading (while somewhat justified) should not be adopted. The manuscript reading is quite reasonable in the larger context of the poem. For more, see Hartung et al., trans., *Songs for the Fast and Pascha*, 119, note 13.

45 ܠܚܬܢܗ̇ ܐܚܕܬܗ ܐܝܟ ܢܘܟܖܝܐ \ ܘܠܚܬܢܗ̇ ܓܝܚܟܬ ܐܝܟ ܢܘܟܖܝܐ (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 43).

46 ܐܝܟܢ ܗܟܝܠ ܡܕܡܝܬܘܢ ܠܝܫܘܥ ܠܗܘ ܢܘܟܖܝܐ ܕܠܗ ܗܘ ܢܘܟܖܝ ܒܟܠ ܨܒܘ܆ ܘܬܘܒ ܨܒܝܬܘܢ ܕܢܘܟܖܝܐܝܬ܆ ܠܚܬܢܝܐ ܚܕ ܚܒܠ ܗܟܝܡ ܠܗ ܕܟܠ ܨܒܘ (*Marc. I*, in *PR* II, 81).

47 See *Fid.* 53.12. In almost every case, however, Ephrem conspicuously avoids speaking of the Father and Son in sharing the same "essence"—the Nicene formula. See Wickes, *St. Ephrem the Syrian*, 37–39.

48 See also *Azym.* 2.9: "The king from the house of David—his servants blasphemed him. / Being insane, they declared him insane. By estranging him (ܐܟܖܝܘܗܝ), they demonstrated

Ephrem's audience almost certainly would have heard the word "stranger" as a rebuke of Marcionite theology. Ephrem's anti-Jewish polemic is thus multi-layered, presenting biblical Jews as proto-Marcionites, and the Marcionites of his time as the spiritual heirs of the biblical Jews.[49]

This repositioning of the biblical Jews in light of Ephrem's own context is central to the dramatic narrative of *Cruc.* 1, in which the fundamental error is that of "estrangement." "Daughter Zion" both wrongly rejects the Bridegroom (Jesus) as a "stranger" and also embraces "strangers" in his place. After describing the "Daughter's" grieved and disgusted response to the arrival of the Bridegroom in his triumphal procession, Ephrem writes that the "Daughter" "blasphemed her betrothed" (Jesus) in order to follow "foreigners," (*gŷûrê*, a synonym for "strangers"). The implication is that Jewish people (and by extension, the Marcionites) deny Jesus by calling him a stranger, only to turn and serve those who are truly strangers. The identity of these foreigners becomes more obvious as the poem progresses. In stanza 11, Ephrem speaks of the crowd's appeal to Caesar (John 19:15) and its call for the release of Barabbas:

> [*Cruc.* 1.11] The debauched one clung to Caesar
> and called out his name, but he did not hear her.
> She put on the names of a stranger,
> and took off the names of the holy Messiah.
> When she saw that the chiefs of the Peoples scorned her,
> she desired the brigand who was akin to her in everything,
> since he bore her images,
> and she too was fully stamped with his [images].[50]

By crying out to Caesar, a "stranger," "Daughter Zion" rejected Jesus. Yet this accusation carries further implications. As I observed above, one of the major

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/ that they had gone insane, had been deceived, and had blasphemed their king." (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 5).

49   As Miriam Taylor shows, the connection between anti-Jewish and anti-Marcionite polemic appears as early as Justin Martyr (see *Dial.* 11) and Tertullian (see *Adv. Marc.* 3.6). Drawing upon her argument that anti-Judaism was an integral feature of early Christian theology, Taylor argues that "the best weapon against Marcion's anti-Judaism, was the church's own brand of anti-Judaism." See Miriam Taylor, *Anti-Judaism and Early Christian Identity*, Studia Post Biblica 46 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 172.

50   ܗܘܐ ܩܥܬ ܐܪܚܐ ܗܘܐ ܐܬܚܬܬ ܐ̇ܝܟ \ ܗܘܐ ܒܟ ܣܕܝܩܬܐ ܕܠܐ ܫܡܥܗ \ ܫܡܗ ܩܪܬ ܐܝܟܢ ܐܝܟ \ ܐܪ̈ܚܐ ܫܡܗܐ ܠܒܫܬ \ ܫܡܗܐ ܫܠܚܬ ܐܝܟ ܪ̈ܝܫܐ ܘܗܘܐ ܘܐܣܬܚܪܘ \ ܕܥܡܐ \ ܕܡܝܐ ܠܗ ܪܓܓܬ \ ܐ ܘܠܗ ܠܝܣܛܝܐ ܒܟܠ ܚܣܢ ܠܗ \ ܘܛܠܚܡ ܗܘܐ ܨܘ̈ܪܬܗ \ ܘܕܡܠܝܐ ܐܦ ܗܘܬ ܒܨܠܡܗ \ ܗܘܐ (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 45).

themes of *Cruc.* 1 is the parallel between the sin of Israel (the Golden Calf) and "Daughter Zion's" rejection of Jesus, with both portrayed in terms of marriage and adultery. Ephrem makes this connection more explicit in stanzas 16 and 17, in which he elaborates on the Jews' predilection for idolatry, concluding that "strangers (*nûkrāyê*) pleased that foolish one," though she hated her "husband" and "betrothed" (st. 17).[51] Here and elsewhere, the Calf appears as the paradigm for a "stranger," which in Ephrem's portrayal appears to be any idolatrous creation taken as a substitute for God.[52]

Further evidence for the connection between the term "stranger" and Ephrem's anti-Marcionite concerns appears in another poem (*Fid.* 86), in which Ephrem directly compares the Marcionite and Jewish views of Jesus. Although Ephrem sometimes presents Marcionites and Jews as mirror images of one another with regard to their sacred texts (with the Jews rejecting the New and the Marcionites rejecting the Old Testament), he does not often compare their views of Jesus, as he does here.[53] Lamenting the "false teachings" dividing the Christian community, Ephrem alludes to the Jewish rejection of Jesus as a model of unbelief:

> [*Fid.* 86.17] Therefore, the blind faction fouled
> your pure beauty. The circumcised despised you,
> for they did not think they had seen
> even a lowly prophet in you. Rather, strange
> teachings they thought they saw in you.[54]

Anticipating the more direct characterization of Jewish and Marcionite viewpoints that will follow in the next stanzas, Ephrem puts Marcionite language in the mouths of "the circumcised." They rejected Jesus, he says, not even accepting him as a prophet because of the apparent "strangeness" of his teachings. In the next stanza, Ephrem makes his double-edged polemic more explicit. Although Jews and Marcionites are similar in that they misinterpret Christ as

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51　ܠܘܩܒܠ ܗܘܐ ܠܗ ܠܥܠܬܐ \ ܗܘܐ ܗܘ ܚܬܢܗ ܡܪܚܡܐ ܚܡܠ ܚܕܝܪ \ ܚܕ ܙܝܣܪ ܚܡܢܝܬܐ ܚܦܚܠ ܠܗ (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 47).

52　See also *Nis.* 27.9. There, evoking once again the dramatic scene of wedding and adultery at Mt. Sinai, Ephrem states that as a result of the "fornication" with the Calf, "they were sealed (ܚܬܝܡܝܢ) with the stamp (ܒܛܒܥܗ) of a stranger (ܢܘܟܪܝܐ)." (Ed. Beck, *Nis.* I, 61).

53　Cf. *CH* 35.7–8; 50; *Virg.* 30.

54　ܡܛܠ ܗܘ ܓܘܕܐ ܥܘܝܪܐ ܛܢܦܗ \ ܠܟܐ ܗܛܝܟ ܚܢܬܟ ܥܠܛܗ \ ܕܚܠܠ ܕܒܕܝܪܐ ܕܓܐ ܠܗ \ ܠܢܒܝܐ \ ܢܚܠܟ \ ܘܢܚܙܝܐ ܣܘܐ ܚܕܪ ܢܐܠܗܟ ܕܡ \ ܚܕ ܢܘܟܪܝܐ ܗܡܝܕܐ ܕܝܘܗ ܚܕܪ (ed. Beck, *Fid.*, 266; trans. Wickes, *Hymns on Faith*, 396).

"strange," they "estrange" him in opposite ways. The unnamed Marcionites are "fools" (*saklê*), who put Christ above the creator. By contrast, Ephrem states, the "circumcised" lower Christ beneath the creator. He thus calls upon Christ to remedy the mistaken viewpoints of "both parties":

> [*Fid*. 86.19] Because they have elevated you too high, and brought you
>   too low,
> level the two sides: come down a little
> from the height of denial
> and strangeness, and ascend from the depths
> of Judaism, even though you are in heaven.[55]

Ephrem's contrast between the "heights" and "depths" of the Marcionite and Jewish understandings of Jesus is of note in its own right. For our purposes, however, it is most significant to observe the ways Ephrem sought to portray Judaism and Marcionism in relation to one another, as two sides of the same coin, so to speak. Furthermore, as we observed in connection with stanza 17, Ephrem used Marcionite language to describe the Jewish response to Jesus. It is thus reasonable to assume that when we see such evocative language elsewhere (*Cruc*. 1, for instance), Ephrem is engaging in a muted critique of Marcionite teaching.

In the earlier examples from *Cruc*. 1, Ephrem portrays the choice of "strangers" over Jesus as fundamentally idolatrous. Indeed, by associating the identification of Jesus as a "stranger" with the plot to crucify him, Ephrem roots the Marcionite conception of Jesus in the original misdeeds of the Jews of the New Testament. In this context, other similar accusations directed toward the Marcionites take on added dimensions. Their fundamental error is "estrangement," to sever themselves from the Son—in this case, by rejecting the Old Testament prefigurations of his coming.[56]

As this analysis has demonstrated, the drama of *Cruc*. 1, in which the "Daughter" turns away from Jesus (like her "mother" in the wilderness) in order to follow after "strangers," is a layered polemic. Here, and elsewhere in Ephrem's writings, the appellation "stranger" carries strongly negative connotations, associated with the worship of the Golden Calf. His critique is clear: just as the Jews

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55   ܕܐܒܘܗܝ ܡܝܟ ܘܐܬܘܚܕܬ ܡܝܟ \ ܐܪܥܐ، ܐܢܘܢ ܙܥܕ ܣܘܗ، ܡܠܠ \ ܚܢ ܗܘ ܙܩܘܝ ܐܡܟܐ
     ܐܝܟ، ܪܚܡܐ \ ܘܐܢܝܘܬܐ \ ܘܐܘܝܘܬܐ ܐܘܗܝܐܐ \ ܘܗܘ ܚܢ ܚܡܘܪܬܐ \ ܘܬܐܪܝܘܡ \ ܘܪܘܡܪܡ ܗܕ ܬܚܬܟ ܐܢܬ، (ed. Beck, *Fid.*, 266; trans. Wickes, *Hymns on Faith*, 397).

56   See *Azym*. 4.22, which makes this association explicit.

served a "stranger" in the form of the Golden Calf, the Marcionites of Ephrem's time reject the Son in favor of a similar "stranger."[57]

These examples reveal the often-multipurpose character of Ephrem's anti-Jewish polemic. Ephrem could portray the biblical Jews as proto-Marcionites and his Marcionite contemporaries as the modern-day "Daughter Zion." He could criticize the Jews responsible for Jesus' death and highlight the similar actions of his contemporary Marcionite opponents, who likewise turned away to serve a stranger. This poem allows us to see, slightly more clearly, the multivalent identity of the "Jews" in Ephrem's polemical writing.

4.2   *Emperor Julian, the Jews, and the Blurring of Distance: The* Madrāšê *against Julian*

Ephrem's dramatic theological imagination is characterized by a blurring of temporal, geographical, and symbolic distance. As several scholars have observed, he presents himself, contemporary events, and the disputes and struggles of his church within a thoroughly biblical frame of reference.[58] Ephrem sometimes ties his context to that biblical framework through the language of likeness (e.g., ascetics are *like* Noah; "heretics" are *like* the Jews). Yet he frequently elides this distance, bringing the world of the Bible and his world much closer together. In the first ten *Nisibene Hymns*, reflecting on the three Persian sieges of Nisibis (338, 350, and 359 CE),[59] Ephrem perceives the hand of God's judgment against the city, as it was against humanity at the time of the flood.[60]

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57   Not for the first time, Ephrem's anti-Marcionite polemic finds parallels in that of Tertullian, who argues that the Marcionites "formed an alliance with Jewish error," following the Jews in rejecting Jesus as an "alien" (*alium*) and "stranger" (*extraneum*) (Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 3.6; ed. René Braun, *Contra Marcion, Tome III* [SC 399], 76). Tertullian's polemical alignment of Jews and Marcionites in Book III of *Against Marcion* is striking; he even reuses and adapts material from his own earlier work *Against the Jews*! For this see, Lieu, *Marcion*, 58–59.

58   See Griffith, "Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns 'Against Julian,'" 245; Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy*, Chapter 2; Wickes, *Bible and Poetry*, 84–85.

59   See Christian Lange, "Gentis suae signum ab arce extulit—Ammianus Marcellinus und Ephraem der Syrer über den Fall von Nisibis," in *Dona sunt pulcherrima: Festschrift für Rudolf Rieks*, ed. Katrin Herrmann and Klaus Geus (Oberhaid: Utopica, 2008). Despite their name, the *Mêmrê on Nicomedia* also reflect primarily on the situation of Nisibis and the need for repentance. On this point, see David Bundy, "Vision for the City: Nisibis in Ephraem's Hymns on Nicomedia," in *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice*, ed. Richard Valantasis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); idem, "Bishop Vologese and the Persian Siege of Nisibis in 359 C.E.: A Study in Ephrem's Memre on Nicomedia," *Encounter* 63, no. 1–2 (2002): 55–64.

60   *Nis.* 1.5. See Emidio Vergani, "Giustizia e grazia di Dio per la città assediata. Le raffigurazioni

In Ephrem's depictions of these sieges, he crafts a clear continuity between the suffering of the Nisibenes and other biblical accounts of divine judgment.[61] With the Christian community of Nisibis linked to the biblical people of God, the Persian adversaries become "foul Assyria,"[62] and worshippers of Baal.[63]

This approach to contemporaneous events and figures—which is so characteristic of Ephrem's metrical works—poses significant challenges for modern interpreters. What specific situations lie behind these opaque allusions, drenched with biblical imagery? Who were these Jews that Ephrem so vehemently criticized? Once again, we confront the central problems that have beset us throughout this chapter.

This section explores these questions by considering the small cycle of *madrāšê Against Julian*, which, of all the writings of Ephrem, provide the clearest historical context for their anti-Jewish polemic. Here, we have some sense of the contemporary events that underlie the dense imagery of Ephrem's poetry. We can therefore glimpse the process at work, attaining some understanding of how Ephrem constructed his own world in relation to that of the Bible through the dramatic medium of publicly performed poetry. This will offer further insight into how Ephrem used the accusation of Jewish involvement in Jesus' crucifixion to speak to an actual situation in his own time, blurred though it may be by Ephrem's tendency to imagine his world in biblical language and imagery.

As several early sources report, the emperor Julian (r. 361–363), after renouncing his Christian faith and embracing traditional "pagan" religion, also sought to facilitate the reconstruction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem.[64] Ephrem is one of the earliest sources for this event, alluding to it at several

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del nemico negli inni su Nisibi (1–12) di Efrem il Siro," in *I nemici della cristianità*, ed. Giuseppe Ruggieri, Testi e ricerche di scienze religiose, nuova serie 19 (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997).

61 E.g. *Nis*. 10.13 (Sodom); 11.11–13 (plagues in Egypt); 5.6–8 (Nebuchadnezzar); 1.8 (Jericho).

62 *Nis*. 6.7.

63 *Nis*. 9.6.

64 This was part of a broader effort to weaken Christians and elevate traditional cults (of which Judaism was one). See Julian, *Ep.* 89, 134, and 204 (ed. J. Bidez and F. Cumont, *Imperatoris Caesaris Flavii Claudii Iuliani epistulae, leges, poemata, fragmenta varia*, RFIC 51 [Turin: Loescher, 1922]); Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 3.3–7 (ed. J. Bernardi, *Grégoire de Nazianze. Discours 4–5*, SC 309 [Paris: Editions des Cerf, 1983]); Ammianus Marcellinus 23.2.3 (Ed. W. Seyfarth, *Ammiani Marcellini rerum gestarum libri qui supersunt*, Bibliotheca Teubneriana [Berlin: Teubner, 1978]); et al. For a fuller account of the sources, see David Levenson, "The Ancient and Medieval Sources for the Emperor Julian's Attempt to Rebuild the Jerusalem Temple," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 35, no. 4 (2004): 409–460.

points in the four poems, which he seems to have composed during and/or immediately after Julian's reign.[65] These *madrāšê* are laden with biblical allusions, especially to the book of Daniel, lending them an "apocalyptic" tone. Ephrem portrayed this alliance between the "Hellene" emperor and the Jews as proof of their mutual condemnation.

In the second *madrāšâ Against Julian*, Ephrem writes this episode of pagan-Jewish collusion in his own time into the narrative of the Jewish rejection of Jesus that culminated in the crucifixion. Ephrem argues that the Jews' support of Julian (like their crucifixion of Jesus) revealed their true pagan nature.

> [*cj* 2.3] They rejected the Savior, the witness of the True One,
> who, when they asked him, taught, "One alone is God."[66]
> Being pagans, they crucified him and went astray with many [gods].
> They rejoiced in the abominable pledge.[67]

The word "pledge" (*rahbûnâ*) was a common legal term for the "earnest" or "down-payment" given to a bride by a groom at the time of betrothal.[68] Ephrem uses the word in that sense elsewhere, and it also appears to be in view in this passage. Once again, we find Ephrem employing wedding imagery to describe the Jews. Here, however, as the context of the poem makes clear, the "abominable pledge" refers to Julian's promise to rebuild the Jewish Temple. Ephrem depicts Julian's "earnest" as a continuation of the same events which led to the crucifixion of Jesus—another manifestation of the inner "paganism" of the Jewish people (Ephrem calls them *ḥanpê*) and a betrayal of their divine spouse. As Ephrem depicts it, the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE was an act of divine judgment for the death of Jesus and a final termination of the sacrificial system and its rites.[69] It was impossible for that Temple to be rebuilt and its rites

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65   See *cj* 1.16–26, 2.7, 4.18–26. This general date for the *Hymns against Julian* is, to my knowledge, undisputed in the scholarship: see Bruns, *Ephräm*, 193; Beck, *Lobgesang*, 16; Murray, "Ephraem Syrus," 755; Griffith, "Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns 'Against Julian,'" 238; Lange, "Ammianus Marcellinus und Ephraem," 31.

66   Mark 12:29.

67   ܟܠܗܘܢ ܠܦܘܪܩܢܐ ܗܘܘܐ ܥܠܝܗܘܢ \ ܣܗܕܗ ܕܫܪܝܪܐ ܕܫܐܠܘܗܝ \ ܐܠܦ ܢܘܚ ܕܚܕ ܗܘ ܐܠܗܐ \ ܘܗܢܘܢ (ed. Beck, *Par.*, 76; trans. McVey, *Hymns*, 235).

68   For more on the custom and the use of this word in Syriac and its cognates in other languages, see Monnickendam, "Articulating Marriage," 318–331.

69   In one instance, commenting upon Jesus' "woes" upon the scribes and Pharisees (Luke 11:37–52), the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* argues that "vengeance will be required" from the city of Jerusalem as well as any others who rejected and betrayed Jesus. See *Comm. Diat.* XVIII.10 (ed. Leloir, *Version arménienne*, 113–114; trans. McCarthy, *Commen-*

to be reconstituted. This was a common trope of early Christian polemic, and it may have served to urge Christian believers against participation in Jewish practices ("Judaizing"), by arguing that such practices had been invalidated without the Temple.[70] In light of this theological presupposition, Ephrem was clearly exercised by the possibility of the Temple's reconstruction, framing it as a catastrophe of apocalpytic proportions.

In the fourth *madrāšâ Against Julian* (st. 20), Ephrem interprets Daniel's prophecy about the devastation of Jerusalem and the "abomination of desolation" (Dan 9:24–27) as the self-evident proof that any attempt to rebuild the Temple was destined to fail.[71] He questions how much more foolish the rebuilding effort would be when allied with pagan power:

> [*CJ* 4.21] They scattered her great altar by the slaughter of the Holy One,
> and they thought the rebuilder of [pagan] altars would reestablish it.
> [4.22] They broke her by the wood of the Living Architect
> but they sustained her by the broken reed of paganism.[72]

For Ephrem, the collaboration of Julian and the Jews lends credence to his portrayal of the Jews as crazed and idolatrous (st. 22, 24). It is, he writes, utterly foolish to think that paganism, that "broken reed"[73] could restore Jerusalem and the Temple. As Ephrem describes it, the destruction of Jerusalem and the cessation of its worship can never be undone (st. 20), because it is the result of the Jews' own actions in crucifying Jesus ("the Living Architect") on the "wood" of the cross. The motif of the Temple's destruction in the *Hymns against Julian*

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tary, 275–276). Elsewhere, following a series of damning antitheses meant to illustrate the Jewish repudiation of God's gifts, the Commentary claims that because of the crucifixion of Jesus, Jerusalem "will lie there in ruins until the completion of judgments (ܠܚܘܪܒܐ ܕܕܝܢ̈ܐ)." Like the *Hymns against Julian*, it claims that this devastation fulfills the prophesy of Daniel. See *Comm. Diat.* XVIII.1.

70   Cf. Aphrahat, *Dem.* 23.46; Origen, *Contra Celsum* 4.22; Tertullian, *Adv. Jud.* 13; Eusebius, *Dem. Evang.* 1.6. For more on this trope of anti-Jewish polemic, see Christine C. Shepardson, "Paschal Politics: Deploying the Temple's Destruction Against Fourth-Century Judaizers," *Vigiliae Christianae* 62 (2008): 233–260.

71   Indeed, as Sidney Griffith argues, the book of Daniel was fundamental for Ephrem's apocalyptic understanding of Julian's reign. According to Griffith's count, Ephrem references or alludes to Daniel at least seven times in the four hymns. (Griffith, "Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns 'Against Julian,'" 250–251.)

72   ܘܦܩܘ ܡܕܒܚܗ ... (ed. Beck, *Par.*, 89; trans. McVey, *Hymns*, 256).

73   See Isa 42:3.

carries an immediacy we do not find elsewhere in Ephrem's writings. Here, contemporary events spurred Ephrem's theological imagination to make sense of this renewed attempt to rebuild the Temple, leading him to present it as a perverse sequel to the Israelites' sin with the Golden Calf and the Jewish crucifixion of Jesus.

Ephrem's polemic in the *Hymns against Julian* offers a window (however opaque) into the contemporary situation behind the rhetoric. Although he has a particular event in mind (Julian's attempt to rebuild the Temple), the drama of these *madrāšê* is, in typical Ephremic fashion, inseparable from the biblical world. As Ephrem presents the poems to his audience, there is no distance between the Israelite dalliance with the Golden Calf, the Jewish role in the crucifixion, and the contemporaneous Jewish alliance with paganism (as represented by Julian). Thus, by illuminating a rare instance where it is possible to contextualize Ephrem's polemic against Jews and their roles in the death of Jesus, this section has also shed light on the challenges in doing so. Likewise, my previous case study demonstrated that the "Jews" of Ephrem's polemic are not only to be understood as Jews, but also as "heretical" Christian sects veiled as Jews (who are the model and type of unfaithfulness because of their roles in crucifying Jesus). In both cases, we can see how Ephrem thoroughly imagined his world by means of biblical imagery, shaping his polemic against the Jews, and by extension, other Christians of his day, in the language and symbolism of the sacred texts.

5　　Dramatizing Supersessionism

The contrast between "the People" (*ʿammâ*) and "the Peoples" (*ʿammê*) recurs throughout Ephrem's writings, as in those of his contemporary Aphrahat.[74] The juxtaposition of the two nearly identical words serves as a kind of shorthand for the supersessionist narrative that was central to Ephrem's view of salvation history. For Ephrem, Jewish rejection was intertwined with Gentile election. As Robin Young writes: "Ephrem is, on the whole, as interested in the trans-national composition of the church as he is in the Jews' reprobation and

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74　See Murray, *Symbols*, 41–67. For this theme in Aphrahat, see *Dem.* 11 (*On Circumcision*); *Dem.* 12 (*On the Pasch*); *Dem.* 19 (*Against the Jews*); and most importantly *Dem.* 16 (*On the Nations which have taken the place of the Nation*). Robert Murray calls this last text the "most formidable collection of Old Testament *testimonia* on this subject made by any early Church Father, with over 50 texts (repetitions and fused quotations make exact counts difficult)." (Murray, *Symbols*, 43).

replacement."[75] As we have already seen, Ephrem frequently draws upon the People/Peoples antithesis when recounting the events of the Passion narrative. He portrays the Passion as the pivotal moment when God shifted his call and blessing away from the Jewish "People" and to the non-Jewish "Peoples." One of the most striking ways in which he makes this point is by shifting the identities of characters in the Passion narrative, turning Jews into Gentiles and Gentiles into Jews so that the story can better be made to serve this dichotomy.

5.1   *The Praise of the "Peoples" and the Silence of the "People":* Eccl. *41*
In the section that follows, I will focus on one such dramatic retelling: the 41st *madrāšâ On the Church*. In this poem, Ephrem situates the antithesis between the "People" and "Peoples" within a larger contrast—between two distinctive responses to the coming of Jesus: the joy of creation and the anger and distress of "Zion." Once again, the narrative setting is the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, a scene which for Ephrem, offered a rich palette for theological imagination and performative creativity. This poem is less concerned with portraying "Daughter Zion" as adulterous (though that theme is present), and more focused on juxtaposing Jewish "sadness" or "silence" with Gentile "joy" or "praise." Ephrem reworked the narrative of the triumphal entry of Jesus in this poem in order to emphasize that contrast, most notably by changing the identity of the welcoming crowds.

The original context of this *madrāšâ*, which is preserved in the miscellaneous *madrāšê* cycle *On the Church*, is unknown. But the poem's biblical emphasis (focused upon the triumphal entry) and polemical tone (critiquing the silence of the Jews in contrast with the praise of the Gentiles) suggest that it may have originally been composed for the Paschal season. The fact that it shares deep parallels with *Cruc*. 1 and *Res*. 3, both of which are preserved in the Paschal *madrāšê* cycles, lends further credence to this suggestion.[76]

Eccl. 41 is written in stanzas of five short lines, with each half line made up of four syllables. This simple metrical pattern, into which Ephrem weaves evocative musical imagery, would have, from the mouths of Ephrem's female choirs, doubtless produced a rhythmic piece of chanted visualization. From the outset

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75   Darling, "The 'Church From the Nations' in the Exegesis of Ephrem," 113.

76   Zion's reaction to her king's arrival is deeply reminiscent of the descriptions of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem in *Cruc*. 1 and *Res*. 3, and in *Eccl*. 38.21. As in those hymns, Ephrem writes that Zion "became sad" (ܐܬܟܡܪܬ) when "she saw" (ܚܙܬ) the good things being accomplished by Jesus. Ephrem employs this exact language in *Res*. 3.5 (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 86). If original, the melody title "this is the month [of Nisan]" (ܗܘ ܝܪܚܐ ܗܢܐ), may provide additional support for viewing *Eccl*. 41 as a hymn for the Paschal season.

(st. 1), Ephrem compares the world and created things to a mouth proclaiming praise, while only the "People" have remained silent, "like a deaf man," refusing to offer worship.[77] This initial stanza establishes a universal context for the performance of this hymn, sung in public by Ephrem's choir and participating through its praise of Christ in the natural order of creation. In the following stanzas, Ephrem clarifies the narrative referent of the poem, describing crippled, lame, deaf, and mute onlookers participating in the celebratory scene of Jesus' triumphal entry (st. 3).[78] He then weaves musical imagery into this narrative, comparing the praises of those who recognized Jesus to lyres, horns, and trumpets: "How many new lyres have played for you, / O our Savior!"[79] In contrast with this jubilant welcome, and with the praise earlier offered by Moses and David, the silence of the "People" is deafening:

> [*Eccl.* 41.5] On two horns, Moses sounded
> to teach them, and on the lyre
> David played. Who is like
> the silent People? They are mute bells,
> that concealed praise. The elders were silent.[80]

In Ephrem's depiction of the triumphal entry here, the welcoming crowds of cheering and dancing people are decidedly non-Jewish, and the Jews remain silent. For this striking portrayal, an obvious reversal of the implications of the gospel narrative, Ephrem could be relying on an earlier tradition or a Diatessaronic variant, though I have found no such sources. This perspective on the triumphal entry, which appears elsewhere in Ephrem and in a later Syriac homily attributed to Ephrem, is likely Ephrem's own innovation.[81] Reworking

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77   *Eccl.* 41.1 (ed. Beck, *Eccl.*, 102).

78   "A crippled man stretched out his hand and took / olive branches. The lame man whom he healed / was like a deer before him and began to leap / before his donkey. Deaf and dumb / gave glory to him with their Hosannas." ܗܘܐ ܓܒܪܐ ܡܚܓܪܐ ܦܫܛ \ ܐܝܕܗ ܘܢܣܒ ܣܘܟܐ \ ܕܙܝܬܐ ܘܐܝܟ ܐܝܠܐ ܗܘܐ \ ܩܕܡܘܗܝ ܘܫܪܝ ܠܡܕܨ \ ܩܕܡ ܚܡܪܗ ܚܪ̈ܫܐ ܘܐܠ̈ܡܐ \ ܝܗܒܘ ܠܗ ܫܘܒܚܐ ܒܐܘܫܥܢܝܗܘܢ (*Eccl.* 41.3 [ed. Beck, *Eccl.*, 103]).

79   ܟܡܐ ܩܝ̈ܬܪܐ ܚܕ̈ܬܐ ܙܡܪܘ \ ܠܟ ܐܘ ܦܪܘܩܢ (*Eccl.* 41.4 [ed. Beck, *Eccl.*, 103]).

80   ܒܩܪ̈ܢܬܐ ܬܪ̈ܬܝܢ ܩܪܐ \ ܡܘܫܐ ܕܢܠܦ ܐܢܘܢ ܘܒܟܢܪܐ \ ܙܡܪ ܗܘܐ ܕܘܝܕ ܡܢܘ ܐܝܟ \ ܥܡܐ ܫܬܝܩܐ ܙܓ̈ܐ ܐܢܘܢ \ ܚܪ̈ܫܐ ܕܟܣܝܘ ܫܘܒܚܐ ܣܒ̈ܐ ܫܬܩܘ (ed. Beck, *Eccl.*, 103).

81   See *Virg.* 20.9 and the Pseudo-Ephremic *Mêmrâ on the Holy Feast of the Hosannas* (ed. Beck, *Sermones II*, 3.320–325). Although it portrays the triumphal entry as the first step in Jesus' rejection by the Jews, *Comm. Diat.* does not go so far as to describe the celebrating crowds as Gentiles. See *Comm. Diat.* XVIII.1–2. See also the comments of Murray, *Symbols*, 46.

the story to identify the crowds as Gentiles enabled Ephrem to bring the Gentile crowds of his own audience into the story.

In the following stanza, Ephrem further enhances this image of Jewish silence at the arrival of Jesus by turning once more to the Golden Calf episode. In this case, he draws upon that familiar locus of anti-Jewish polemic and recasts its significance in light of the predominant antithesis of this poem: praise and silence.

> [*Eccl.* 41.6] With that Calf they forged cymbals
> And flutes. Toward that mute thing
> They were crying loudly,[82] but toward the Hearer-of-All
> [They were] as without speech.
> May he reprove them—how perverse are they![83]

While there are obvious similarities between the depiction of the Jewish rejection of Jesus here and the wedding-adultery motif discussed earlier in this chapter, *Eccl.* 41 also has its own distinctive features. Through emphasizing the sounds of praise (of the rejoicing crowds at the entry into Jerusalem and the entire creation), the *madrāšâ* builds to a crescendo: the Jews, "mute bells" (*zaggê haršê*) at the arrival of Jesus, excluded themselves by their silence, choosing instead to offer praise to a "mute" (*haršâ*) idol.

Eccl. 41 offers the most detailed example of this antithesis between "silence" and "praise" in Ephrem's corpus.[84] Throughout his writings, Ephrem envisions both a positive and negative role for silence. In the *Hymns on Faith*, for instance, he frequently exhorts his subordinationist opponents to be silent in the face of mysteries related to the Father and Son.[85] Yet Ephrem reverses the dynamic in *Eccl.* 41, portraying silence as the negative corollary of praise, which is the appropriate response to the divine.

In the liturgical setting of *Eccl.* 41, Ephrem blurs the distinction between the biblical scene and the worship of his community by identifying the now-

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82 Lit. "they became criers" (ܗܘܘ ܩܥܝܢ).

83 ܗܠܝܢ ܕܗܘ ܡܢ ܗܢ ܟܠ ܗܘܘ ܥܠܘܗܝ ܗܘܘ ܡܨܝܟ \ ܐܟ ܟܐ \ ܐܝܟ ܟܗ ܡܨ ܟܚܕܟܐ ܗܘ ܕܗ ܟܝܕ ܡܢ ܐܝܢ \ ܐܟ ܡܛܠ (ed. Beck, *Eccl.*, 103).

84 Though not always in the context of the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, this antithetical parallel can also be found in *Nat.* 23.9–10, 24.14–20; *Virg.* 19.2–4, 20.9, 26.11–14, *Virg.* 44; *Nat.* 24.4,11; *Cruc.* 4.10–13; *Ieiun.* 5.7–10. On the subject of silence and speech in Ephrem's thought, see Kees den Biesen, *Simple and Bold: Ephrem's Art of Symbolic Thought* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014), chapters 3 and 4.

85 See, e.g., *Fid.* 1.18–19, 2.4, 3.4,9, et al.

Gentile church with the crowds offering praise at the triumphal entry. Ephrem's choir (and, presumably, his audience, through repeating refrains) joins the whole created order in singing their praise. The "Zion" of *Eccl.* 41, on the other hand, is a paradigmatic counter-example, a warning against the dangers of remaining silent. Such a portrait of the triumphal entry is striking in its divergence from the canonical gospel accounts of the scene, in which the celebrating crowds are undoubtedly Jewish. Ephrem, however, has reworked the story, turning the cheering onlookers into the prototypes of the church, and reinforcing the People/Peoples dichotomy.

5.2   *Dramatizing the Events of the Passion as Supersessionist Parables: Azym. 5 and* Cruc. *4*

The example of *Eccl.* 41 is just one of many examples of Ephrem importing the antithesis between Jews and Gentiles into his retelling of episodes in the narrative of the death of Jesus.[86] Ephrem's *madrāšê* regularly draw on the events of the Passion narrative to create tapestries of supersessionist symbolism—images of Jewish rejection and Gentile election. In such examples, Ephrem will point to an action which the Jews intended to humiliate Jesus, and explain that the action instead paradoxically redounded to the Jews' shame and Jesus' glory. *Cruc.* 8 offers a number of cases that illustrate this theme, including, for example, an interpretation of the reed which the soldiers gave to Jesus as a scepter (Matt 27:29–30).[87] In the third stanza of this poem, Ephrem plays on the fact that a reed was a writing instrument, describing the reed which the soldiers handed Jesus as a pen, which became the very means by which he wrote out their condemnation.[88] Ephrem continues this line of thought in

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86   Another interesting example is the portrayal of the two thieves crucified with Jesus as representing the "People" and "Peoples." See *Cruc.* 5.7. The treatment of the same episode in *Comm. Diat.* (xx.22), with its lengthier format and attention to the details of the biblical text, adds nuance to its representation of the two thieves. Ephrem allows of both that "we do not know whether he was circumcised or not," but explains that both thieves were speaking in turn "like the circumcised" and "like the uncircumcised." (ed. Leloir, *Version arménienne*, 296–297; trans. McCarthy, *Commentary*, 305).

87   There are two incidents involving a reed (ܩܢܝܐ) in the Gospel Passion narratives: one in which the soldiers mockingly give Jesus a reed to hold as his scepter along with the crown of thorns (Matt 27:30; Mark 15:19) and the other in which the guards offer vinegar to Jesus on a sponge attached to a reed (Matt 27:48).

88   For a similar interpretive move, see Romanos' *kontakia "On Peter's Denial"* (18.7) and *"On the Passion of Christ"* (20.22). (Ed. Grosdidier de Matons, *Hymnes*, Vol. 2). See Derek Krueger, *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 160–161.

the following stanza, noting that although the soldiers intended the reed to "reproach" Jesus, "he made them a broken reed."[89] In this example, we should also note that Ephrem describes the characters (identified in the gospel traditions as Pilate's soldiers) as Jewish, creating a consistent target of blame for the suffering and humiliation of Jesus in the events of the Passion narrative.

Elsewhere, Ephrem makes similar remarks about Jesus' scourging,[90] the creation of the crown of the thorns,[91] the positioning of Jesus' cross between two thieves,[92] and the crowd's appeal to Caesar.[93] All were meant to shame Jesus, but instead glorified him and humiliated his persecutors (who in each circumstance are rewritten as Jews). Ephrem likewise portrays the miraculous events surrounding Jesus' crucifixion (the three hours of darkness,[94] the tearing of the Temple veil,[95] and the earthquake[96]) as proof of Jewish shame and replacement. Ephrem's *madrāšê* tend to compound such references: where one appears, there are usually many others.[97]

In order to explore how these narrative references function in Ephrem's writings, I will examine his portrayal of one particular episode: when the soldiers robed Jesus in a purple robe.[98] In two different poems (*Azym.* 5 and *Cruc.* 4), Ephrem draws out the ramifications of this event for the divine rejection of the Jews, presenting it as a great reversal—though intended for shame, it resulted in glory. With the assistance of an extra-canonical tradition, Ephrem transforms the soldiers robing Jesus into Jewish priests. *Cruc.* 4 offers a summary of Ephrem's retelling of the episode:

> [*Cruc.* 4.3] As we have heard, "they went in and brought out the covering of the altar."
> They searched deeply for a pretext of accusation to put the sign of kingship upon him,

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89 ܪܚܡܐ ܡܠܟ ܥܠܐ ܘܥܒܕ̣ ܠܨܝܪܐ ܡܢ ܐܡܪ ܐܘܪܫܠܡܗ̣ ܗܘ ܡܠܟ (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 73).
90 *Cruc.* 4.11.
91 *Nis.* 58.8.
92 *Cruc.* 5.7.
93 *Cruc.* 4.7–8; 8.3.
94 *Azym.* 13.22–23.
95 *Cruc.* 4.6, 4.12.
96 *Cruc.* 4.13.
97 See especially *Cruc.* 4, 5, 8.
98 Mark 15:16–17; John 19:5.

> they went in and uncovered the holy altar,
> and clothed him with it, that he would die.
> Through the coverings of the holy place, he took the kingship,
> like the ephod which David also put on.[99]

In this stanza, Ephrem cites an extra-biblical tradition that predates the composition of the hymn. Ephrem introduces the tradition with the Syriac quotation marker *lam* and a rather distinctive introductory phrase. Instead of a typical Ephremic textual reference marker like "he said," or "it is written," he prefaces this account of the origins of the robe with "as we have heard" (*a[y]k d-šamaʿnan*).[100] These words appear to indicate that Ephrem differentiated this narrative detail from what was included in his Gospel text, perhaps recognizing it as an oral tradition. Yet that has no apparent effect on his use of the story, which he presents as factual and authoritative.

The identification of Jesus' robe with the altar cloth from the Temple does not appear in any other source, although it is reminiscent of later traditions which account special significance to the "seamless garment" (John 19:23). The fifth- or sixth-century Syriac version of the *Legend of the Thirty Pieces of Silver*, for instance, imagines the garment as an object of heavenly origin, sent by King Abgar of Edessa to Jesus as a gift in gratitude for his recent healing.[101] The tradition cited here by Ephrem also fits within a broader trajectory of early Christian legends about the symbolic downfall of the Temple at the time of the death of Christ. Jerome, for example, refers on several occasions to the overturning of the lintels of the Temple and the manifestation of a heavenly voice announcing its ruin.[102] Because Ephrem is our only source for the particular tradition about Jesus' robe, it is difficult to distinguish the details of the tradition from his use of it. It is unclear, for instance, whether Ephrem was quoting

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99 ܪܚܝܩܐ ܠܡ ܕܐܝܬܝܗ ܟܝܡ ܢܬܟܣܝ ܚܠܐ ܩܘܕܫܐ ܘܐܠܒܫܘܗܝ ܗܘܐ ܚܠܐ ܕܢܡܘܬ ܒܬܟܣܝܐ ܕܒܝܬ ܩܘܕܫܐ ܚܠܐ ܥܠܝܗ ܐܠܒܫܗ ܐܝܟ ܦܕܬܐ ܕܐܦ ܕܘܝܕ ܐܝܟ ܕܐܦ ܠܒܫܗ (Cf. 2 Sam 6:14; ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 56).

100 See Lund, "Observations," 209–210, for an account of Ephrem's citation technique in the *Commentary on Genesis*, including the use of *lam*.

101 See *The Legend of the Thirty Pieces of Silver*, trans. Tony Burke and Slavomír Čéplö, in *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*, Vol. 1, ed. Tony Burke and Brent Landau (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2016), 303–305.

102 See, e.g., Jerome, *Ep.* 18.9, *Ep.* 46.4. In another example, the *Protoevangelium of James* (10.2) depicts the child Mary as involved in weaving the veil. For a summary of the traditions related to the veil of the Temple, see Daniel M. Gurtner, "The Veil of the Temple in History and Legend," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49, no. 1 (2006): 97–114.

from some unknown written source or from an oral tradition (though I suspect the latter). Further, we cannot say whether the association of the altar cloth with a claim to kingship was an innovation of Ephrem or original to his source.

In the next two stanzas of *Cruc*. 4, Ephrem unpacks the implications of the "pretext of accusation" leveled against Jesus by clothing him with the altar cloth. In Ephrem's telling of the story, because of prohibitions in Numbers 4 against touching the "holy things," garbing Jesus in the altar cloth brought a penalty of death against him:

> [*Cruc*. 4.4] A profane person who touched the altar or its vessels must surely die.[103]
> "In our law," they said, "he deserves death."[104] But so that they would not be found guilty
> by the kingdom that subjugated them,
> they did not explain the pretext of this—of those things with which they had clothed [him];
> they feared to disclose it.
> They accused [him] cunningly, since they were afraid.[105]

The next stanza summarizes the implications of the previous stanzas, that robing Jesus in the altar cloth provided two justifiable accusations against Jesus. Their first allegation was that the cloth indicated a claim to kingship, and their second charge was that Jesus had violated the ritual prohibitions against touching sacred cultic objects. Hedging their bets, the priests assumed that at least one of these would result in Jesus' execution. Ephrem writes:

> [*Cruc*. 4.5] For they wanted to set two snares for the One who examines all:
> With cunning, they put upon him the sign of kingship,
> and put upon him the robe of glory,
> so that "either," they said, "by one or the other
> he will be given over to death." So, by two things they took him captive,

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103 Cf. Num 4:15, 20.

104 John 19:7.

105 ܚܣܝܟܐ ܕܩܪܒ ܠܡܕܒܚܐ ܐܘ ܠܡܐܢܘܗܝ، ܡܘܬܐ ܚܝܒ ܐܘ ܚܠܩܘܗܝ \ ܘܗܐ ܐܬܐ ܚܣܟܘ ܠܗ ܐܡܪܝܢ ܕܡܘܬܐ ܚܝܒ ܒܢ ܘܐܝܟ ܕܠܐ ܢܣܒܘܢ \ ܡܢ ܡܠܟܘܬܐ ܪܚܒܫܬ ܐܢܘܢ \ ܠܐ ܦܫܩܘ ܥܠܬܗ (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 56).

> [and] by two things he took them captive, for he took the kingdom and
> the priesthood.[106]

The action of this narrative (as told in *Cruc.* 4) therefore ends with an irony. Although the Jews sought to falsely accuse Jesus by clothing him in the forbidden vestments of the altar, their actions actually revealed his possession of both the royal and priestly authority. Although the idea of the altar cloth of the Temple indicating kingship seems less than obvious, in his other reference to this tradition (*Azym.* 5), Ephrem specifically identifies the altar cloth as "purple." There, he writes:

> [*Azym.* 5.6] The priests took the veil from the holy place,
> and cast pure purple upon him.[107]

In this example, we encounter another hint as to the origin of the tradition. The reference to "purple" (*argônâ*) fits the description of the robe in several Syriac biblical sources.[108] The association of this purple robe with the altar cloth probably derives from the Peshitta of Numbers 4:13, which specifies that a "garment of purple" (*naḥtâ d-argônâ*) was to cover the sacrificial altar.

Note also that Ephrem explicitly names those who robed Jesus as priests, a change from the surviving Syriac gospel accounts (where they are Pilate's soldiers). It is unclear whether that change was due to Ephrem or his source. Regardless, by downplaying or revising the responsibility of Pilate and his soldiers and emphasizing Jewish culpability, this matches a broader pattern in Ephrem's works and in other early Christian texts like the *Gospel of Peter* and the *Acts of Pilate*. The identification of these characters as priests also fits with Ephrem's rather unique view that Jesus inherited the Aaronic high priesthood

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106   ܗܩܡ ܠܢ ܩܢܡ ܐܘܦܠܢܣܘ ܠܚܠܝܢܚܘ ܠܚܘ ܚܘܟ ܚܠ ܐ ܚܙܐ ܠܢ ܚܠܘܗ، ܚܘܠܝܚܘܟ ܠܢ ܚܠܚܘܗ ܐ ܚܗܘܘܐ ܐܚܪܐ ܚܠܗܘܗ، ܠܚܘܥ ܐܘܚܚܘܣܘܗ ܐܘܐܪ ܚܥ ܚܘ ܗ، ܐܘܐܪ ܐ ܠܡ ܚܥ ܗܐ، ܐܘ ܚܥ ܚܡ ܚܪܐܗ ܐ ܠܣܠܗܚ (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 56).

107   ܗܩܠܘܗ، ܩܝܚܘ ܚܘܚ ܚܗܠܚܪܐܗ؛ܐ ܩܝܟܝ ܚ ܩܡܠܥ ܚܥܚܚ ܚܫܚ (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 11).

108   The word appears in the Old Syriac versions of Matt 28:28 and Mark 15:17, and the Peshitta of John 19:2, as well as the reference to the passage in the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* (xx.17). Unfortunately, no fragments of the Old Syriac gospels are extant for most of John 19. See George Anton Kiraz, *Comparative Edition of the Syriac Gospels: Aligning the Sinaiticus, Curetonianus, Peshitta and Harklean Versions*, Vol. 4: John (Leiden: Brill, 1996). This passage of the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* is only extant in Armenian, but I think we can be confident it reflects the text of the Syriac Diatessaron.

as well as the spiritual priesthood of Melchizedek.[109] In the stanzas that follow, Ephrem argues that although the priests intended to "slander" Jesus with the purple cloth, their action simply marked his true identity as the "son of the king". The same idea appears further on in *Azym.* 5, in which Ephrem expands upon the significance of the purple cloth for identifying kingship.

> [*Azym.* 5.12] They cast kingship upon the son of David;
> though unwitting, they had made him king.
> [13] Wanting to snatch from him what was his,
> they had added another kingdom.
> [14] For he is the king of kings, and the weaver of crowns;
> the whole kingdom gathered before him.[110]

Ephrem once again presents this scene as bearing unintended consequences for the Jewish priests who placed the purple robe on Jesus. The robe meant for mockery in fact demonstrated Jesus' royal status and authority.[111]

This treatment of the purple robe is a relative anomaly in Ephrem's use of the Passion narrative. Ephrem draws upon an otherwise unknown extra-canonical tradition identifying the purple robe with the altar cloth from the Temple (described as purple in Num 4:13). While there is much that remains unknown about the form of this tradition as Ephrem received it, it is not difficult to see its appeal for a supersessionist retelling of the purple robe episode. Identifying the altar cloth with the purple robe shifts the antagonists in this narrative from the Roman soldiers to the Temple priests and allows Ephrem to portray the story as representing Jesus' true claim to Levitical priestly authority. The cloth's purple color further suggests the well-known hue of royal robes. Whether or not Ephrem's sources made an explicit association between the purple altar cloth and a claim to kingship, we cannot say, but in his retelling, Ephrem takes these two elements of the apocryphal narrative and develops them into paradoxical demonstrations of Jesus' twofold power. The robe becomes an instrument of

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109 See Pregill, *The Golden Calf*, 225–232; Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 178–182. Ephrem offers varying explanations as to when Jesus received his Levitical priesthood. The *Mêmrâ on Our Lord* places it when the elderly priest Simeon blessed the infant Jesus (*SdDN* 53), and the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* places it at the time of Jesus' baptism by John (*Comm. Diat.* IV.3).

110 ܐܘܡܪ ܐܘܟܡܐ ܕܡܠܟܘܬܐ ܗܘ ܡܢ ܐܪܙܐ ܕܝܢ ܒܪ ܕܘܝܕ ܠܐ ܝܕܥ ܡܠܟ ܡܠܟܐ ܗܘܘ ܥܠܝܗܝ \ ܕܒܥܘ ܕܢ ܠܗ ܡܢ ܕܝܠܗ \ ܡܠܟܘܬܐ ܐܚܪܬܐ ܐܘܣܦܘ ܗܘܘ ܠܗ \ ܕܗܘ ܗܘ ܡܠܟ ܡܠܟܐ ܘܓܕܘܠܐ ܕܟܠܝܠܐ \ ܟܠܗ ܡܠܟܘܬܐ ܟܢܫܬ ܩܕܡܘܗܝ܂ (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 11–12).

111 See also *Comm. Diat.* XX.17.

double self-condemnation for the Jewish antagonists, revealing Jesus' possession of both the kingship and priesthood.[112]

Despite the unique character of this example, it sheds light on a common motif in Ephrem's *madrāšê*—the idea that Jewish actions intended to humiliate Jesus actually served to condemn them and glorify Jesus. Such supersessionist paradoxes are central to how Ephrem imagined the significance of the suffering and death of Jesus, as the turning point in God's relationship with the Jewish "People" and calling of the non-Jewish "Peoples." In each of the case studies in this section, we have also seen Ephrem change Jewish characters into Gentiles and Gentile characters into Jews. In *Eccl.* 41, the cheering crowd at Jesus' triumphal entry became a crowd of the "Peoples," and in *Cruc.* 4 and *Azym.* 5, the Roman soldiers robing Jesus in purple to mock him became Jewish priests bearing the purple altar cloth as a pretext to kill him.

6 Alternative Portrayals of Jews

Throughout this chapter, I have pointed to the shifting portraits of the "crucifying Jews" in Ephrem's theological imagination. Ephrem employed common supersessionist motifs familiar from late antique Christian texts, but used them to tell different kinds of stories in texts with discrete purposes and performative contexts. We have seen the Jews play a number of roles as Ephrem reimagined and retold the narrative of Jesus' suffering and death. This once again points to the dramatic and occasional character of Ephrem's theological imagination.

In this section, I will examine alternative portrayals of Jews, in the Old Testament commentaries and in Ephrem's *mêmrê* and *madrāšê*. A few of Ephrem's works are entirely void of anti-Jewish polemic, even where it might be expected. In several other places, the Jewish involvement in the death of Jesus is not a cause for polemic, but an opportunity to marvel at the extent of the Passion's benefits. Elsewhere, it is the devil, not Jews, who receives blame for Jesus' suffering and death. My goal is to explain how such striking variation could originate from the same author, and, in the process, to demonstrate the problems that could arise from a selective reading of Ephrem's works. If we only considered examples from the *madrāšê* like those I have analyzed above, for example, we might mistakenly imagine Ephrem's works to be incessant

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112 See also the brief allusion to this episode in *Nis.* 58.10, in which Ephrem associates it with the loss of both kingship and priesthood: "By the garments of mockery that they gave him, / he mocked them / for he took the raiment of glory, of priests and kings" (ed. Beck, *Nis.* II, 88).

fountains of anti-Jewish hatred.[113] The reality, however, is more complex. By considering alternative portrayals of the Jewish involvement in the Passion, this section will further reveal how Ephrem's portrayal of the Jewish role(s) in the death of Jesus was sensitive to the genre, audience, and themes of each particular text.

6.1   The "Jewish" Ephrem of the Old Testament Commentaries

Earlier in this chapter, I described the work of Elena Narinskaya, who challenges the idea that Ephrem's anti-Jewish polemic was central to his theology, arguing that it was simply a matter of rhetoric. Although I view her conclusions as flawed, one strength of her study is its close examination of Ephrem's prose commentaries on Genesis and Exodus. She raises an important issue: scholars have given considerable weight to the anti-Jewish rhetoric of Ephrem's *mêmrê* and *madrāšê*, but have not contrasted that rhetoric with the more positive tone toward Judaism and Jewish sources found in Ephrem's commentaries. Narinskaya asks: "Which Ephrem is true to himself, and which is inconsistent?"[114]

The comparison of the genres opens a promising line of inquiry, but the question is problematic. We ought not to assume that one of these two (in Narinskaya's view, the less polemical, "Jewish" Ephrem of the commentaries) is the "true Ephrem," while the other is false. Instead, Ephrem's inconsistent employment of anti-Jewish polemic reflects both his ability to operate within the boundaries of distinct literary conventions and his awareness of his audiences.

As Narinskaya notes, scholarship has tended to analyze Ephrem's works in "fragments," without sufficient attention to the distinct genres of particular texts.[115] Careful consideration of genre and style is essential to understand why anti-Jewish polemic is almost entirely absent from Ephrem's Old Testament commentaries and *Prose Refutations*, yet is such a common theme in his pub-

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113   A.P. Hayman and Karl Kuhlmann are the most prominent representatives of this perspective. Ephrem's "incessant need to bring in anti-Jewish themes reveals how deep-seated was his detestation of the Jews," Hayman argues (431). According to this reading, Ephrem simply hated Jews, and his writings reflect that hatred. He could not resist putting anti-Jewish comments into his work, even when they seem out of place. See A.P. Hayman, "The Image of the Jew in the Syriac Anti-Jewish Polemical Literature," in *To See Ourselves As Others See Us: Christians, Jews, "Others" in Late Antiquity*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs and Caroline McCracken-Flesher (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985); Karl H. Kuhlmann, "The Harp Out of Tune: The Anti-Judaism/anti-Semitism of St. Ephrem," *The Harp* 17 (2004): 177–183. Cf. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 68.

114   Narinskaya, *Ephrem, a 'Jewish' Sage*, 35.

115   Narinskaya, *Ephrem, a 'Jewish' Sage*, 289.

licly performed *mêmrê* and *madrāšê*. To address this issue, I will briefly examine the references to the death of Jesus in the Old Testament commentaries and the presence (or, rather, absence) of anti-Jewish polemic in these texts.

The style of Ephrem's Old Testament commentaries is quite distinctive. Ephrem follows the narrative of the biblical text, and interweaves selections of the text with his own narration.[116] The commentaries consistently focus upon summarizing and explaining the narrative of the book in question, and only rarely refer to events or narratives outside of that focal text, except when interpreting events of particular theological significance (such as the sacrifice of Isaac or the blessings of Jacob).[117] In these rare cases, Ephrem mentions symbolic or typological interpretations, but does not expand upon them in any detail. For instance, in his remarks on Exodus 12 in the *Commentary on Exodus*, he writes: "And on the fourteenth [of Nisan], when [the lamb] was slaughtered, its symbol was crucified."[118] Later, describing the specific instructions not to break any of the lamb's bones, he explains: "'No bone in him shall be broken,' because although our Lord's hands and feet were pierced and his side was opened, not a bone in him was broken."[119]

These comments are particularly striking for what Ephrem does *not* say. He does not mention anything about the Jews and their involvement in Jesus' death, nor does he engage in any polemic against the continued celebration of the Passover meal (as he does in many of his *mêmrê* and *madrāšê*). In fact, none of the several references to the death of Jesus in the *Commentary on Exodus* even mention Jews.[120] Similarly, in the handful of references and allusions to the Passion narrative in the *Commentary on Genesis*,[121] Ephrem only once alludes to the motif of Jewish rejection and Gentile election, a theme which,

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116   Narinskaya, *Ephrem, a 'Jewish' Sage*, 111–112; Lund, "Observations," 209–210; Kremer, *Mundus Primus*, 431.

117   E.g.: "in the ram that hung in the tree and had become the sacrifice in the place of Abraham's son, there might be depicted Him who was to hang upon the wood like a ram and was to taste death for the sake of the whole world." (*Comm. Gen.* XX.3; ed. R. Tonneau, *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et in Exodum commentarii*, CSCO 152–153, Syr. 71–72 [Leuven: Peeters, 1955], 84; trans. Amar and Mathews, *Selected Prose Works*, 169); see also *Comm. Ex.* 12.3.

118   ܘܐܬܕܒܚ ܒܐܪܒܥܣܪ. ܐܬܙܩܦ ܐܪܙܗ ܗܘܐ (*Comm. Ex.* XII.3; ed. Tonneau, *Commentarii*, 141; trans. Amar and Mathews, *Selected Prose Works*, 247).

119   ܘܓܪܡܐ ܠܐ ܬܬܒܪܘܢ ܒܗ. ܥܠ ܕܐܦܢ ܐܝܕܘ̈ܗܝ ܕܡܪܢ ܘܪ̈ܓܠܘܗܝ ܐܬܒܙܥ, ܘܣܛܪܗ. ܐܬܦܬܚ ܐܠܐ ܓܪܡܐ ܠܐ ܐܬܬܒܪ ܒܗ. (*Comm. Ex.* XII.3; ed. Tonneau, *Commentarii*, 141; trans. Amar and Mathews, *Selected Prose Works*, 247).

120   *Comm. Ex.* VII.4, XXIV.1.

121   Clear references can be found in *Comm. Gen.* XX.3, XXVII.1; XLI.4; XLII.6; XLIII.3.

as we have seen, is so prominent in many of his other writings.[122] In that single instance, his tone is not polemical toward Jews. Rather, he simply presents this interpretation as a matter of fact, and does not elaborate.

This approach is quite distinct from what we have seen in many of Ephrem's publicly performed *mêmrê* and *madrāšê*, in which the mention of the Passover and its symbolism almost always occasions anti-Jewish invective. These obvious differences raise many questions about the audiences and objectives of the commentaries. Do they imply, as Narinskaya argues, that the anti-Jewish polemic of Ephrem's other writings was entirely a rhetorical move, unreflective of an actual theological point of view? To answer this, we must return to the distinctive characteristics of the prose commentaries. They hold to a limited narrative frame of reference, serving as interpretive retellings of the books of Genesis and Exodus. Within this narrow framework, the fact of Ephrem's reliance upon Jewish exegetical traditions does nothing to disprove his theological understanding of the Jewish people. Polemic against the later Jews of the New Testament, or against the Jews of his own day, simply did not fit within the confines of the commentary.

Indeed, in his critiques of Jewish interpretation of the Bible elsewhere, Ephrem does not criticize Jews for their interpretation of the "plain sense" of the Bible, but rather for their inability to see the symbols and types of Christ hidden therein.[123] Such a critique would not preclude borrowing from Jewish traditions which supplemented or explained biblical narratives (as Ephrem seems to have done in his commentaries). The deeper problem, as Ephrem argues in one of his *madrāšê* (*Virg.* 10), is that the Old Testament narratives do not contain *sufficient* meaning within themselves, but rather "flow from"[124] something beyond themselves:

> [*Virg.* 10.5] For it would be easy to hold that this symbol in Egypt
> merely happened, but the truth will not go away
> from which the symbol flowed.[125]

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122   Commenting on Jacob crossing his hands to bless Ephraim and Manasseh (Gen 48:13–14), he writes: "Here too the cross is clearly symbolized to depict that mystery with which Israel the firstborn departed, just as Manasseh, the firstborn, and the Peoples increase in the manner of Ephraim the younger." (*Comm. Gen.* XLI.4; ed. Tonneau, *Commentarii*, 110; trans. Amar and Mathews, *Selected Prose Works*, 199).

123   See, e.g., *Comm. Diat.* XX.29–39; *Virg.* 8–10.

124   For this metaphor, see also *Virg.* 9.7–12.

125   ܗܘܐ ܗܘܐ ܠܗ ܓܝܪ ܠܡܐܚܕ ܕܪܐܙܐ̈ܕܒܡܨܪܝܢ ܗܘܐ ܗܘܐ ܗܘ ܟܕܗܘ ܡܚܝܢ ܠܗ ܕܝܢ ܒܨܕ \ ܗܘܐ ܐܘ ܐܪܙܐ̈ܕ ܗܘܐ \ ܫܪܪܐ ܕܡܢܗ ܪܕܐ \ ܐܪܙܐ (ed. Beck, *Virg.*, 34; trans. adapted from McVey, *Hymns*, 305. Cf. *Cruc.* 3.6).

In the argument of this poem, the "truth", the counterpoint of the "symbol in Egypt" is proven by the "revealed sign" that the priesthood and kingship of the Jewish people came to an end with the rise of the Gentiles (st. 6–7). In other words, biblical and historical events, namely the fall of the Jewish monarchy, the destruction of the Temple, and the end of the sacrificial cult, provide evidence of the new covenant with the non-Jewish "Peoples," and a new, deeper interpretation of the Exodus. This form of engagement with the Exodus material stands in stark contrast with Ephrem's prose commentaries on Genesis and Exodus. The major difference lies with the limited narrative scope of those commentaries, to which Ephrem shows himself remarkably sensitive.

In his preface to the *Commentary on Genesis*, Ephrem presents that text as a brief summary of what he had written about "at length" (*b-saggîyātâ*) in his *mêmrê* and *madrāšê*.[126] Perhaps the commentaries on Genesis and Exodus functioned as introductory materials for students in Ephrem's "school" or "reading circle" in Nisibis, before moving to the "teaching songs" (*madrāšê*) and "homilies" (*mêmrê*) which would expound the deeper meaning of the texts.[127] We cannot, therefore, dismiss the anti-Jewish polemic of Ephrem's *madrāšê* and *mêmrê* because such polemic does not appear in a few prose works. Rather, we should view the diversity in Ephrem's language and themes across these genres as evidence of his dynamism as a writer. The narrow scope of Ephrem's focus in the commentaries reveals his careful adherence to the constraints and conventions of distinctive genres.

This difference is also indicative of Ephrem's attention to different audiences. When addressing a para-liturgical or liturgical audience, he could speak to the perceived needs of his community, by reinforcing its identity over and against Judaism; and while speaking to an audience that was presumably smaller and more educated, he could appropriate Jewish exegetical traditions within the narrow confines of a commentary, without the need to engage in anti-Jewish polemic.[128]

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126   *Comm. Gen.* Prologue, 1 (ed. Tonneau, *Commentarii*, 3).

127   Andrew Palmer suggests a similar context with regard to the *Commentary on Genesis* and the *Hymns on Paradise*. See Andrew Palmer, "A Single Human Being Divided in Himself: Ephraim the Syrian, Man in the Middle," *Hugoye* 1, no. 2 (1998): 119–163, 133–134. See also Blake Hartung, "The *Mêmrâ on the Signs Moses Performed in Egypt*: An Exegetical Homily of the 'School' of Ephrem," *Hugoye* 21, no. 2 (2018): 319–356, 334.

128   It is also possible that participation in Jewish practices was simply not as appealing to the more educated audiences of the prose commentaries, and therefore Ephrem did not feel the need to emphasize anti-Jewish polemic.

6.2   *More Positive Assessments of Jews: The* Mêmrê *and* Madrāšê

While Ephrem was far more likely to engage in anti-Jewish polemic in his publicly performed poems than in his commentaries, even in his *mêmrê* and *madrāšê*, the characterization of the Jewish role in the death of Jesus was not entirely negative. Since this chapter has highlighted the variability of Ephrem's anti-Judaism, these more positive assessments merit consideration. In the 30th *madrāšâ On Virginity*, a poem meditating upon the three "harps" which Christ plays (the Old Testament, the New Testament, and creation), Ephrem speaks against both Marcionites and Jews, whom he sees as having incomplete portraits of Christ's revelation. Unsurprisingly, given the anti-Marcionite angle of the poem, such a critique leads to a discussion of God's dual characteristics of "grace" and "justice."[129] The final line of that stanza then introduces the image of Jesus as "physician of his crucifiers." In stanza ten, Ephrem continues this theme:

> [*Virg*. 30.10] They fastened you with nails, but you made them
> like medicines for their pains.
> They pierced you with a lance and water flowed forth,[130]
> as the blotting out of their sins.
> Water and blood came out to make them fearful
> and to wash their hands of your blood.
> The Slain One gave water from his blood to his slayers
> [so that] they might be purified and at rest.[131]

If we were simply to draw this single stanza out of the context of the poem, it might be difficult to make sense of Ephrem's positive tone toward the "slayers" of Jesus. However, this stanza occurs immediately after the poem's shift in emphasis toward highlighting the justice and mercy of God. In this context, the crucifixion serves as the ultimate illustration of the God's compassion, overflowing even in the face of such a betrayal. The nails become "medicine" and the flowing water and blood a purifying wash.

   To interpret the blood and water that flowed from Jesus' side (John 19:34) as the blood of the Eucharist and water of baptism was already a well-established

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129   Unfortunately, the manuscript is fragmentary at this point, so it is impossible to know the entirety of the argument presented in stanza 9.

130   John 19:34.

131   ܚܝܠܐ ܗܘ ܣܡܐ ܕܒܗܘܢ ܕܚܒܫܟ ܗܘ ܗܘ ܐܢܬ ܩܒܘܪܬܟ ܠܗܘܢ ܟܐܒܝܗܘܢ \ ܘܡܦܩܐ ܠܕܡܟ ܡܢ ܕܟܝ \ ܐܝܟܢ ܠܡܟܦܠܕܗܘܢ، ܕܟܝ ܡܢ ܕܡ ܕܡܐ \ ܘܢܦܝܚܐ ܢܦܘܫܘܢ (ed. Beck, *Virg.*, 112; trans. adapted from McVey, *Hymns*, 397).

trope in early Christian literature.[132] Yet in this stanza, Ephrem takes it in a sur-
prising direction, emphasizing baptismal imagery to the exclusion of eucharis-
tic symbolism: "water flowed forth / as the blotting out of their sins."[133] The
application of that imagery is striking. The water and blood "wash their hands
of your blood," language that recalls Pilate washing his hands of blood guilt
for Jesus' death and the crowd's response "his blood be on us and on our
children!" (Matt 27:24–25). Ephrem inverts that condemnation, imagining the
blood and water as an overflowing baptismal font that can blot out sin and
purify even the most blood-stained hands. In the next stanza, he continues
to develop this theme of the overwhelming mercy found in Jesus' crucifix-
ion:

> [*Virg.* 30.11] The bound were released by the Bound One;
> the crucifiers were saved by the Crucified One.
> For the crops that were stored up by sinners
> there are springs of assistance.[134]

Employing pairs of related words—"bound ones" and "bound one"; "crucifiers"
and "crucified"—and the agricultural metaphor of crops and springs, Ephrem
emphasizes the abundant mercy available for all. This mercy even applies, it
seems, to the "crucifiers."

How are we to explain this more gracious turn in Ephrem's portrayal of Jews?
I do not want to overstate the ramifications of this passage. It appears that
Ephrem is saying that salvation would have been available to the "crucifiers"
if they had embraced it. As we can see elsewhere in Ephrem's writings, he does
not seem to believe that they did. Further, although the application of God's
mercy to the Jews fits this poem's particular concerns with divine revelation
and the comprehensiveness of divine compassion, these themes do not typi-
cally appear in many other poems which mention Jews and the death of Jesus.
The poem is atypical in that respect. It would thus be problematic to read the
positive language in this *madrāšâ* as a general affirmation of Jewish salvation
or of universalism.

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132   See, e.g., Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 2.2; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 13.21; John Chrysostom,
       In. io. hom. 85.3; Augustine, *Io. ev. tr.* 120.2.

133   ܠܚܐ ("to blot out") appears in the Syriac version of Colossians 2:14, a passage to which
       Ephrem frequently alludes. For more on Ephrem's use of this passage and this word, see
       chapter 5.

134   ܕܐܣܝܪ̈ܝܢ ܗܘܘ ܐܫܬܪܝܘ ܒܐܣܝܪܐ \ ܘܙܩܘ̈ܦܐ ܒܙܩܝܦܐ ܐܬܦܪܩܘ ܡܢ ܗܘ \ ܚܠܦ ܟܕ̈ܣܐ
       ܕܟܢܫܘ ܗܘܘ ܚܛܝ̈ܐ \ ܡܒܘ̈ܥܐ ܕܥܘܕܪܢܐ (ed. Beck, *Virg.*, 112;
       trans. McVey, *Hymns*, 397).

Another example of a more positive assessment of Jews in relation to the death of Jesus appears in the *Mêmrâ on our Lord*. In the first sections of this lengthy Christological homily, Ephrem describes the cosmic benefits of the incarnation and death of Jesus, for the "People" as well as for the "Peoples." He depicts Jesus' blood as a sort of idolatry repellent. Because the Jews were "marked with your blood" (*etkatam ba-dmāk*) through crucifying Jesus, from then on that blood protected them from their pagan tendencies.[135] In the next portion of the homily, he explains this further. Though Israel continually turned away from God toward idols throughout its history, the Jews crucified Jesus on the charge that he was leading them astray from God.[136] Yet ironically, it was Jesus who actually led Israel away from idolatry to worship the one God: "So, believing that they had crucified the one who was turning them away from the one God, they discover that it is precisely because of him that they turned away from all the idols to the one God."[137]

Although this effect of the Jewish rejection of Jesus (their abandonment of idolatry) is seemingly positive, Ephrem argues that it should indict them of their evil all the more. Ephrem appears to be grappling here with the fact that unlike the biblical Israelites, the Jews of his day avoided idolatry assiduously. Such a reality could have undermined his attempts (as seen earlier in this chapter) to link contemporary Jews to idolatry. One could certainly argue that Ephrem's explanation of that reality is a backhanded compliment, but it is nevertheless significant. Even such mild appreciations of contemporaneous Jewish behavior are almost entirely nonexistent in early Christian literature.[138]

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135 *SdDN* 5.3 (ed. Beck, *SdDN*, 5; trans. Amar and Mathews, *Selected Prose Works*, 281).

136 Cf. John 19:7.

137 *SdDN* 6.1: ܚܕ ܗܘܐ ܡܚܬܡ ܕܠܗܘ ܡܢ ܕܡܨܛܠܒ ܠܥܡܐ ܡܢ ܚܕ ܐܠܗܐ ܘܦܢܝܢ ܐܫܬܟܚܘ. (ed. Beck, *SdDN*, 5; trans. Amar and Mathews, *Selected Prose Works*, 281).

138 Miriam Taylor identifies the few positive references to "Judaism" in early Greek and Latin Christianity as referring "to those aspects of Jewish tradition which the orthodox church identified as belonging to its *own* past." For Taylor, these positive references portray Judaism as a "symbolic" mirror for the church. See Taylor, *Anti-Judaism and Early Christian Identity*, 168. These references in Ephrem are certainly theological in nature, but they refer not to the Jews of the Old Testament, but to those of Ephrem's own time. One entirely non-polemical appreciation of Jewish practice (specifically Sabbath keeping) can be found in Bardaiṣan's *Book of the Laws of Countries*. See Drijvers, *The Book of the Laws of Countries*, 56.21–58.20 (Syriac). For an analysis of Bardaiṣan's portrayal of Jewish practice, see Shaye J.D. Cohen, "Jewish Observance of the Sabbath in Bardaiṣan's *Book of the Laws of Countries*," in *Jews and Syriac Christians: Intersections Across the First Millenium*, ed. Aaron Michael Butts and Simcha Gross (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 92–94.

At other points in Ephrem's writings, Jews do not bear the brunt of the blame for the death of Jesus. They instead appear as unwitting pawns of Satan, who bears ultimate responsibility for the crucifixion.[139] In some of these cases (e.g., *Virg.* 12.30 and *Virg.* 13.2), Ephrem presents the actions of the Jews and those of Satan as basically one and the same. The "crucifiers" become nothing more than hands and mouths upon which the Evil One could operate. Finally, in a few cases (e.g., *Nis.* 60.30, a monologue poem spoken in the voice of Satan), Jews disappear completely as agents in the narrative, leaving Satan alone as the antagonist culpable for Jesus' suffering and death.

6.3   *Understanding the Varied Portrayals of Jews*

Ephrem's writings inhabited unique contexts, and these distinct contexts affected his presentation of the Jewish responsibility for the suffering and death of Jesus. In some settings, such as the liturgical poems for the Paschal season, placing the blame at the feet of Jews must have made rhetorical sense. In others, however, Jewish culpability simply does not appear to have been a subject of Ephrem's attention. Indeed, he was even willing on occasion to imagine some of the benefits of Jesus' death extending to the "crucifiers."

Unfortunately, Narinskaya's quest for the "true" Ephrem's opinion of Jews leads to a dead end.[140] How could this diversity of portraits bring us to that kind of knowledge? Yet we must be frank in admitting that a supersessionist logic underlies even Ephrem's most positive portrayals of the "People." The silence of the Old Testament commentaries offers nothing to contradict that. If we dismissed Ephrem's polemic as mere rhetoric devoid of genuine conviction, we would be left with very little, since the reality of Ephrem's relationship with the Jewish communities of Nisibis and Edessa is so inscrutable to us. Further, where would we draw the line? What standards could we use to disregard some texts as theological rhetoric and others as reflective of Ephrem's real feelings? I would argue that we must instead accept these diverse portraits of Jews as indicative of the distinctive literary habits, rhetorical goals, and theological concerns at work in Ephrem's composition of different texts. The variability of the roles he assigned to Jews in retelling the story of Jesus' suffering and death should caution us against making simplistic statements about his relationship with Jews, much less constructing a psychological profile of the man himself.

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139   E.g., *Virg.* 20, one of Ephrem's two *madrāšê* on the city of Ephraim, where, according to the Gospel of John, Jesus stayed before returning to Jerusalem for the last time. Because of their subject matter, it is possible that these two hymns were composed for sometime around the paschal season. In this particular hymn (st. 4), Ephrem presents the actions of the Jews as the result of a diabolical *trick*.

140   Narinskaya, *Ephrem, a 'Jewish' Sage*, 35.

7   Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to present a complex picture of how Ephrem portrayed the Jewish role in the Passion and death of Jesus. The first question— whether Ephrem's anti-Judaism was more reflective of rhetoric or reality—is undoubtedly the most challenging, given the evidence. My answer was that the "Jews" of Ephrem's imagination are rhetorical constructions, although the polemic against them must have been rooted in close contact between Jews and Christians in Nisibis and Edessa. Yet any attempt to answer this question is complicated not only by the sparse evidence, but by Ephrem's mode of writing, which blurs boundaries between biblical texts and erases distinctions between the biblical past and Ephrem's present.

This chapter particularly attended to the distinct literary and theological functions of the "Jews" in his writings. It emphasized reading various statements of Ephrem about Jews within the dramatic settings in which they are embedded. Ephrem's retellings of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem offered particularly vivid examples of how he reimagined the biblical traditions of the suffering and death of Jesus to shape the Christian identity of his audience over and against Jewish "others," often personified as "Daughter Zion." These texts resist easy systematization; instead of one dramatic retelling of the Jewish rejection of Jesus, we saw many distinct dramas. In a few, we could discern a reality behind the rhetoric. Yet in most cases, whatever contemporaneous situation might have existed lies obscured beneath layers of allusive and opaque imagery. At times, careful examination of Ephrem's language can reveal a subtle multiform polemic, in which the Jewish role in the crucifixion of Jesus served as a model of rejection that Ephrem used to portray his "heretical" Christian opponents.

A sadly unsurprising revelation of this chapter was the centrality of supersessionism to Ephrem's many dramas of the Jewish rejection of Jesus. He frequently reinscribed the events of the story of Jesus' death as supersessionist parables in which "good" characters are rewritten as non-Jews and "bad" characters as Jews. He further reveled in what he saw as paradoxical moments of reversal in the narrative, when these supposedly "Jewish" characters thought they had shamed or injured Jesus, only to see negative consequences redound upon themselves. Ephrem's use of an apocryphal tradition in which the purple robe given to Jesus was the altar cloth from the Jerusalem Temple is a striking example of this dramatic theme.

The final section of this chapter explored alternative portrayals of Jewish involvement in the death of Jesus—the silence of Ephrem's Old Testament commentaries and several less accusatory references to Jews from Ephrem's

mêmrê and *madrāšê*. These divergent portraits of Jews in relation to the death of Jesus demonstrate a larger point central to the contention of this book—that Ephrem told and retold the stories of the Passion and death of Jesus in a variety of texts, genres, and performative settings. As he did so, he imagined Jews playing different roles and enacting traditional anti-Jewish theological motifs. The precise part played by the "People" shifted depending on Ephrem's particular rhetorical goals.

The Economy of Debt and Payment: Economic Imagery, Benefaction, and the Death of Jesus

1   Introduction

Abstract concepts like "sin" and "redemption" are inescapably expressed through metaphor, and certain metaphors were central to how Ephrem imagined the significance of the Passion and death of Jesus. In the following example, from one of the *Madrāšê on the Unleavened Bread*, Ephrem repeats a theme echoed throughout this poem—the contrast between the mercy and grace Jesus offered and the rejection he faced. In doing so, Ephrem draws upon a rich vein of commercial or economic metaphors to retell the story of Jesus, from his incarnation to his death:

> [*Azym.* 1.15] The wisdom of God came down to the house of fools.
> She gave wisdom through her teaching and illuminated through her
>   interpretation.
> As a wage for her help, they struck her cheeks.
> [1.16] The Good One came down to the wicked in his goodness.
> He paid that which he did not owe, and he was paid what he had not
>   borrowed.
> They defrauded him doubly, when they cheated him and paid him.[1]

The nexus of economic metaphors ("payment," "borrowing," and "wages") in this excerpt provides an instructive summary of several terms and concepts that were key to Ephrem's understanding of the death of Jesus and the redemption it offered.

Stanza 15 begins with an evocation of the incarnation, with Jesus identified as the feminine divine wisdom. Wisdom came down to teach, but was struck in response (an allusion to Jesus being slapped in his appearance before the coun-

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1   ܐܠܗܐ \ ܚܟܡܬܐ ܢܚܬܬ ܠܒܝܬ ܣܟܠܐ \ ܝܗܒܬ ܚܟܡܬܐ ܒܝܘܠܦܢܗ ܘܐܢܗܪܬ ܒܦܘܫܩܗ \ ܐܠܐ \ ܒܦܪܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܕܪܢܗ ܡܚܐܘܗܝ \ ܠܦܟܝܗ \ ܛܒܐ ܢܚܬ ܠܘܬ ܒܝܫܐ ܒܛܒܘܬܗ \ ܦܪܥ ܕܠܐ ܚܝܒ ܘܐܬܦܪܥ \ ܕܠܐ ܝܙܦ ܟܣܘܗܝ ܬܪܝܢܐܝܬ ܐܡܬܝ ܕܛܠܡܘܗܝ ܘܦܪܥܘܗܝ, (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 3).

cil in John 18:22).[2] Introducing the debt and payment imagery, Ephrem portrays
the slap as the ungrateful "wage" (*agarâ*) offered to Jesus for his teaching. In
the following stanza, he continues to contrast the gratuitous nature of Jesus'
actions with those of his persecutors: "He paid (*praʿ*) that which he did not
owe (*ḥâeb*)." Similarly, Ephrem notes that Jesus had "borrowed" (*awzep*) noth-
ing that merited the payment of suffering. He owed no debt, but paid it down
nonetheless. For their part, human beings "paid" (*praʿ*) Jesus with the "wage"
(st. 15) of suffering.

The prevalence of economic language related to "debt" and "payment" in this
example is unsurprising in the broader context of late antique Christianity and
Judaism. But what does Ephrem mean when he affirms that Jesus "paid" human
"debt"? Did he pay the devil or God the Father? What was the payment? Fur-
ther, what does this imagery reveal about Ephrem's assumptions regarding the
relationship between God and humanity?

In this chapter, I will explore how Ephrem made use of economic metaphors
to imagine the death of Jesus as the climax of a commercial exchange (a pay-
ment of debt).[3] In the first part of this chapter, I will argue that this imagery
rested upon certain assumptions about the divine–human relationship which
can best be understood in the context of the ancient social bonds of patron-
age and benefaction. I will further contend that Ephrem's somewhat cautious
approach in using these metaphors was shaped by his polemical encounter
with Marcionite Christians, who drew on similar economic imagery in their
own theologies but took the metaphors in directions that Ephrem found highly
objectionable. Ephrem challenged the Marcionite use of economic language
for their own vision of redemption, and assiduously avoided presenting the
death of Jesus as a "ransom" (a biblical image favored by the Marcionites).[4]

The structure and sources for this chapter will further emphasize a central
assertion of the book as a whole—that Ephrem was thoroughly unsystematic,
and that we must situate his theological imagination within the distinct literary
and performative contexts in which it took shape. This chapter will therefore
explore Ephrem's engagement with the theme of the redemptive debt payment

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2 This retelling of the salvation-historical narrative with Jesus as the feminine divine Wisdom
   calls to mind a passage in Gregory of Nyssa's homily *De tridui spatio*, which identifies Christ
   as "omnipotent Wisdom" (παντοδύναμος σοφία) (ed. Gebhardt, 280).
3 Though Ephrem uses other metaphors, particularly sickness–health, to describe human sin
   and redemption, he does not often speak of the role of Jesus' death in healing the sickness of
   sin or bringing health.
4 As I will discuss at the end of this chapter, Ephrem almost always favors the non-biblical root
   ܦܪܥ ("to pay") over the biblical root ܙܒܢ ("to buy," "ransom"), favored by Marcionites.

of Jesus' death within two distinct literary and performative venues: his liturgically or para-liturgically performed *mêmrê* and *madrāšê*, and prose polemical discourses that likely originated in some kind of "scholastic" setting.

Many of our sources that imagine the death of Jesus as a redemptive payment of debt take the form of brief references in Ephrem's metrical *mêmrê* and *madrāšê*. Although I will cite from a number of *madrāšê* cycles in this chapter, the *Hymns on Virginity* and the *Hymns on the Church* are particularly valuable, since many of these poems have a largely moral or paranaetic emphasis, with a focus on sin and repentance.[5] Metrical writings such as these tend to emphasize two aspects of debt payment: first, that Jesus paid human debt through his Passion and death, and second, that the faithful must also blot out their debts through repentance and obedience. Ephrem's common emphasis on the necessity of both the debt-paying death of Jesus and the continued remission of debt by the Christian faithful is rooted in ancient ideals of mutual obligation. Yet as I will show, Ephrem's *mêmrê* and *madrāšê* are far from systematic on these topics. Rather, Ephrem prefers to draw his audiences into a dramatic vision of redemption and forgiveness, into which he interweaves Adam's primal sin, Jesus' debt-paying death, and the repentance and obedience of his hearers.

In the latter part of the chapter, I will turn to examine another set of sources, the polemical discourses commonly known as the *Prose Refutations*. Since these texts focus on rebutting particular teachings of rival religious groups (Marcionites, Manichaeans, and Bardaisanites), economic metaphors for redemption are not especially common. However, in the three *Discourses against Marcion*, Ephrem targets aspects of a rival redemptive narrative (that of the Marcionites), which like his community, affirmed the debt-paying power of Jesus' Passion and death. Marcionites offered their own vision of redemption through a "purchase" or "ransom" of souls from the creator by the death of Jesus. Ephrem's engagement with this redemptive narrative is significant for understanding his use of economic language and how he imagined the redemptive power of Jesus' death.

Taken in light of the rest of my study, the subject matter of this chapter comes the closest to "atonement" theology as traditionally understood. It sheds

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5 These two cycles are diverse collections of *madrāšê*, each made up of a number of small groups of poems sharing the same meter and melody, joined to one another by common themes. These *madrāšê* cycles are, in my view, clear examples of the editorial process that produced the extant collections. Whoever created them seems to have made an effort to link smaller units of poems by common themes. At times, the resulting collection was more cohesive (as in the *Hymns on Faith*), while a collection like the *Hymns on the Church* was still quite miscellaneous in character. See Hartung, "Authorship and Dating," 318–319.

light on tensions among Christians regarding the use of this sort of economic imagery to describe the death of Jesus, and situates it within a particular social context. Finally, this chapter demonstrates quite clearly what I argued in the introduction—that Ephrem had no systematic doctrine of the death of Jesus, but a nexus of language and imagery that he employed differently, depending on the distinct literary and performative contexts of his writings. At the same time, though, this chapter reveals some clear points of commonality and coherence in Ephrem's use of economic imagery to describe the significance of the death of Jesus.

2   Economic Imagery and the Context of the Debt Payment Motif

2.1   *Understanding Ephrem's Economic Imagery*
As Gary Anderson has argued, the use of economic imagery for sin and redemption by Ephrem and other early Syriac Christian writers demonstrates their inheritance of a deep vein of tradition stretching back to Second Temple Judaism. Over the course of the composition of the Hebrew Bible and development of Rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity, the primary metaphor for sin shifted from *burden* or *stain* to *debt*.[6] The metaphor of sin as "debt" (*ḥawbâ*), Anderson observes, would have been very familiar to Ephrem both from a reading of the New Testament and from his own native Syriac idiom. Although Anderson focuses on Ephrem's understanding of the redemptive power of almsgiving, he rightly connects Ephrem's portrayal of almsgiving to a larger redemptive economy wherein Christ demonstrates his "surprising intention to become a debtor to us."[7] In what follows, I will introduce Ephrem's economic imagery, and argue that we should make sense of his portrayal of the debt-paying death of Jesus within the framework of the patronage or benefaction relationships that were so common at all levels of society in the late antique Mediterranean and Near East. This social-historical angle will add further depth to our understanding of Ephrem's economic vision.

The *Commentary on the Diatessaron* offers a useful starting point for our analysis. The commentary's statements on sin, redemption, and the death of

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6   Anderson, *Sin*, 153.

7   In fact, Anderson argues that for Ephrem, almsgiving is a tangible expression of *faith*. He highlights the financial connotations which "faith" carries in many languages, including our own (e.g., "full faith and credit"; "fidelity," etc.) (Anderson, *Sin*, 155). In Anderson's work, this aspect of Syriac Christian theology serves to challenge a post-Reformation dichotomy between faith and works in western Christianity.

Jesus are lengthier and more developed than elsewhere in Ephrem's corpus, and they closely parallel the treatment of those themes in many other texts. In an extended passage extant in Syriac, the commentary gives varying perspectives on the purpose and meaning of Jesus' death, including notably for our purposes, the payment of debt.

> And because our debt so surpassed everything in its enormity, neither prophets nor priests, nor the just, nor kings, were sufficient for it. Therefore, when the Son of the Lord of all came, although omnipotent, he did not pay our debt either in the womb [of his mother], by his birth, or by his baptism. [He did not pay it] until he was delivered over to the cross and tasted death, so that his death might be the payer of our debt. Through it, that [debt], which all creatures were incapable of paying, would be paid.[8]

This passage is instructive for several reasons: first, it reveals Ephrem's consistent preference for the verbal root *prʿ* ("pay") to describe the action taken by Jesus at his death. As I will show below, Colossians 2:14 is Ephrem's usual biblical source for debt imagery, although that text uses the word *ʿaṭṭâ* ("blot out," "cancel") to describe the cessation of the debt. Yet this excerpt from the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* shows that Ephrem frequently imagined the redemption using the non-biblical terminology of "payment"—Jesus "paid down" (*praʿ*) the debt (*ḥawbtan*) that humans owed. Second, although Ephrem engages here in some theological reflection on the concept of the debt payment of Jesus' death, he only references the events of the Passion narrative in the broadest terms, speaking of Jesus being "delivered over to the cross" and "tasting death."[9] This is generally true across Ephrem's works—when speaking of the "economy" of redemption, he almost never goes into detail in connecting his theological affirmations to the events of Jesus' death.

Finally, the above quotation reveals Ephrem's perspective that the Passion and death of Jesus had a unique debt-paying function. Only Jesus could have paid the debt (no one else), and Jesus' death in particular was the only "redeemer" or "payer" (*pārûʿâ*) of human debt. Jesus did not pay the debt through

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8   ܡܛܠܬܐ ܕܣܘܓܐܗ ܕܚܘܒܬܢ ܥܠ ܟܠ ܡܕܡ ܗܘܐ ܝܬܝܪ ܓܝܪ. ܠܐ ܢܒܝܐ ܘܠܐ ܟܗܢܐ ܠܐ ܠܗ ܣܦܩ. ܘܠܐ. ܟܐܢܐ ܘܠܐ ܡܠܟܐ. ܟܕ ܐܬܐ ܗܟܝܠ ܒܪ ܡܪܐ ܕܟܠ. ܟܕ ܚܝܠܬܢ ܗܘ. ܠܐ ܦܪܥ ܚܘܒܬܢ ܠܐ ܒܟܪܣܐ ܘܠܐ ܒܝܠܕܗ ܘܠܐ ܒܡܥܡܘܕܝܬܗ. ܥܕܡܐ ܕܐܫܬܠܡ ܠܨܠܝܒܐ ܘܛܥܡ ܡܘܬܐ. ܕܢܗܘܐ ܡܘܬܗ ܦܪܘܥܐ ܕܚܘܒܬܢ. ܕܒܗ. ܗܘ ܐܬܦܪܥܬ ܗܝ ܕܠܐ ܣܦܩܘ ܗܘܘ ܟܠܗܘܢ ܒܪܝܬܐ ܠܡܦܪܥܗ. (*Comm. Diat.* XXI.32; ed. Leloir, *Texte syriaque*, 232; trans. McCarthy, 333).

9   See Matt 16:28 et par.

his birth or baptism, but only when "he was delivered over to the cross and tasted death." Ephrem makes a similar statement in *Cruc.* 8. In that *madrāšâ*, the poet marvels at the paradoxical nature of redemption, that the payment of debt would occur on a little hill like Golgotha:

> [*Cruc.* 8.5] Blessed are you too, O Golgotha.
> Heaven has envied your smallness.
> For it was not when our Lord was hidden
> in heaven above [that] reconciliation occurred.
> Upon you was our debt paid.[10]

The ideas in this stanza, which occurs in the context of a list of "beatitudes" extolling various locales and objects of the Passion narrative (such as the inscription posted above the cross and the empty tomb), do not receive any additional elaboration in the poem. Nevertheless, the concept is clear: the payment of human debt was uniquely accomplished in the crucifixion of Jesus. As these examples demonstrate, the use of economic imagery (particularly the payment of debt) was a recurring (though often undeveloped) feature of Ephrem's understanding of the significance of the death of Jesus.

In what follows, I will situate this economic imagery in a particular historical context: the ancient social bonds of benefaction and patronage. Ephrem consistently portrays God's payment of human debt on the model of a benefactor, as we see, for instance, in one of the *madrāšê On the Nativity*:

> [*Nat.* 3.10] Thanks be to the Rich One who paid [the debt] in place of us all,
> something he did not borrow, but he signed and became indebted for us again.[11]

With the mention of "payment" (*praʿ*), Ephrem evokes the death of Jesus, but cloaks it in economic metaphors. As in *Azym.* 1.16 (cited above), Ephrem envisions Jesus taking on a debt he did not "borrow" (*îzep*), a verb associated with financial lending.[12] Yet, as Anderson notes, Ephrem goes further, imagining God

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10   ܦܘܒܝܟ ܐܦ ܠܟܝ ܐܘ ܓܠܓܘܬܐ \ ܐܬܚܣܕܬ ܠܟܝ ܫܡܝܐ ܙܥܘܪܘܬܟܝ \ ܕܠܘ ܟܕ ܟܣܐ ܗܘܐ
      ܡܪܢ \ ܒܫܡܝܐ ܗܘܐ ܚܘܣܝܐ \ ܒܟܝ ܗܘܐ ܦܘܪܥܢ ܚܘܒܬܢ (ed.
      Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 73). See also *Nat.* 3.8,10; *Virg.* 25.2–3.

11   ܘܒܟ, ܠܥܬܝܪܐ ܕܦܪܥ ܚܠܦ ܟܠܢ \ ܡܕܡ ܕܠܐ ܐܙܦ ܘܚܬܡ ܘܗܘܐ ܠܢ ܗܘ \ ܚܝܒܐ ܗܕ ܒܗ ܬܘܒ
      ܘܡܢ, ܡܬܟܠܗܘܢ (ed. Beck, *HNat*, 22; trans. McVey, *Hymns*, 85).

12   "He was paid (ܐܬܦܪܥ) what he had not borrowed (ܐܘܙܦ)." (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*,
      3).

not only paying down the existing debt but "becoming indebted (*ḥāb*) for us." To be clear, the portrayal of that debt payment is not of a faceless market transaction, but of a relational interaction between two parties—the divine "Rich One" (*ʿattîrâ*) and the poor whose debts he has paid as an act of gracious benefience. This economic image does not therefore envision God as a divine banker, but as a wealthy benefactor or patron who showers benevolence upon his clients by freeing them from debt slavery.

2.2 *Ancient Patronage and Benefaction*

In ancient Mediterranean societies, patron–client relationships (relationships between persons of greater and lesser social standing and power) were fundamental societal bonds, with their own sets of norms and expectations. As David deSilva puts it: "personal patronage was an essential means of acquiring access to goods, protection or opportunities for employment and advancement."[13] While small-scale patronage was abundant, these kinds of relationships also played out on a larger scale in the actions of wealthy elites in the public square. Abundant epigraphical evidence shows that it was typical for elites to finance large-scale displays of public benefience for the inhabitants of their city (a practice generally described as benefaction or euergetism).[14] These displays allowed the wealthy to portray themselves as the indispensable patrons of their city.

Forms of patronage and benefaction (albeit with some local variations) seem to have been the norm across the Roman Empire, including its eastern provinces. The centrality of these social relationships endured well into Ephrem's lifetime and beyond. Writing of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, Peter Brown observes: "patronage was as strong as ever in the later empire and that patronage still wore its ancient, Roman face. Patronage was a fact of life."[15]

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13   David A. DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 96.

14   The modern scholarly term "euergetism" derives from the Greek εὐεργέτης (benefactor). According to the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, "Civic euergetism was a mixture of social display, patriotism, and political self-interest." ("Euergetism," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. Simon Hornblower, Antony Spawforth and Esther Eidnow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 546–547.) For a summary of epigraphical evidence in the Greek East, see Claude Eilers, *Roman Patrons of Greek Cities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). The first major study to bridge the gap between epigraphy and New Testament language and imagery was F.W. Danker, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Field* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1982).

15   Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 25.

Scholars have debated how precisely to understand the categories of patronage and benefaction and whether these social bonds differed between the Latin- and Greek-speaking regions of the empire. Were large-scale benefaction (euergetism) and personal patronage two distinct forms of "social exchange"?[16] Was there a fundamental distinction between a more formalized system of personal and civic patronage practiced in the Latin west and less structured notions of public benefaction in the Hellenistic east?[17] There are, to be sure, some clear distinctions between the formal patronage relationships envisioned by Latin-speaking Romans and the practice of public and private benefaction elsewhere in the empire.[18] In addition, it is difficult to determine how reciprocity, which was an essential quality of personal patronage, would function on the level of public benefaction. Still, I would side with Carolyn Osiek in arguing that attempts to strongly differentiate between Greek euergetism and Latin patronage are largely overstating the distinctions. Such efforts more likely reflect a modern scholarly concern for terminological precision than the actual ways these relational patterns were perceived in antiquity.[19]

If this is the case, what can we say with confidence about the social connections between patrons and clients in antiquity? In an article examining Greco-Roman conceptions of divine beings as benefactors or patrons, Jerome Neyrey summarizes seven widely-accepted elements of the ancient patron–client relationship:

1. The relationship was *asymmetrical*.
2. It involved an *exchange* of resources between patron and client.
3. The two parties became obligated to one another, and expressed this obligation in terms of *loyalty* or *fidelity*.
4. The patron and client both stood in a *favored* relationship with one another.
5. The relationship was *reciprocal*, with the client and patron bearing obligations to one another.

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16   See Stephan Joubert, "One Form of Social Exchange or Two? 'Euergetism,' Patronage, and Testament Studies," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 31 (2001): 17–25.

17   See Paul Veyne, *Bread and Circuses: Historical Sociology and Political Pluralism* (London: Penguin Press, 1990), 75.

18   For one, the Romans had a concept of *patronicium publicum*, by which a leading Roman politician could become the personal patron of a city. This practice is without parallel in the public benefaction of the Hellenistic world. See John Nicols, *Civic Patronage in the Roman Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 9, 13.

19   Carolyn Osiek, "The Politics of Patronage and the Politics of Kinship: The Meeting of the Ways," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 39, no. 3 (2009): 143–152.

6.   The relationship was portrayed in terms of *kinship*, with the patron as "father" and the client as "son."

7.   The giving and receiving of *honor* was an important part of the relationship.[20]

In recent years, a number of scholars, including Neyrey, Osiek, and many others, have drawn from this historical and anthropological scholarship on patterns of patronage and benefaction in antiquity and applied those insights to early Christian sources (especially the New Testament). Some have argued that patronage and benefaction shed light on the social dynamics of the early Christian communities (for example, between Paul and the churches he founded).[21] Others have utilized the patronage framework to examine early Christian conceptions of the divine–human relationship.[22] In what follows, I will keep to the latter trajectory, situating Ephrem's understanding of the relationship between God and humanity (and thus of the "economics" of redemption) within this particular social framework.

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20   Jerome H. Neyrey, "God, Benefactor and Patron: The Major Cultural Model for Interpreting the Deity in Greco- Roman Antiquity," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27, no. 4 (2005): 465–492. Neyrey's list of characteristics is a revision of a well-known earlier list by S.N. Eisenstadt and L. Roniger, *Patrons, Clients and Friends, Interpersonal Relations and the Structure of Trust in Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 48–49.

21   See, e.g., John K. Chow, *Patronage and Power: A Study of Social Networks in Corinth*, JSNT Sup (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1992); Peter Lampe, "Paul, Patrons, and Clients," in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*, ed. J. Paul Sampley (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 2003); Osiek, "The Politics of Patronage".

22   See, e.g., Frederick W. Danker, "Bridging St. Paul and the Apostolic Fathers: A Study in Reciprocity," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 18 (1988): 84–94; James R. Harrison, *Paul's Language of Grace in Its Graeco-Roman Context*, WUNT (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003); David A. DeSilva, "Patronage and Reciprocity: The Context of Grace in the New Testament," *Ashland Theological Journal* 31 (1999): 32–84; David J. Downs, "Is God Paul's Patron? The Economy of Patronage in Pauline Theology," in *Engaging Economics: New Testament Scenarios and Early Christian Reception*, ed. Kelly D. Liebengood (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009). Adam J. Powell, "Irenaeus and God's Gifts: Reciprocity in *Against Heresies* IV 14.1," in *Studia Patristica LXV*, ed. Markus Vinzent (Leuven: Peeters, 2013); Christopher Bounds, "The Understanding of Grace in Selected Apostolic Fathers," in *Studia Patristica LXIII*, ed. Markus Vinzent (Leuven: Peeters, 2013); James A. Kelhoffer, "Reciprocity As Salvation: Christ As Salvific Patron and the Corresponding 'Payback' Expected of Christ's Earthly Clients According to the *Second Letter of Clement*," *New Testament Studies* 59, no. 3 (2013): 433–456. Most recently, see Adam Messer, "God and Gift in Origen of Alexandria," (PhD dissertation, St. Louis, MO, 2018); idem, "Origen of Alexandria and Late Antique Gift-Giving: The Integration of Benefaction with Christian Theology and Experience," *JECS* 30, no. 2 (2022): 193–221.

2.3   *Patronage and Benefaction in the Syriac Context*

The phenomena of patronage and benefaction in Syriac literature from late antiquity (either as social realities or as metaphors for framing divine–human interaction) remain largely unstudied. In part, this is due to a paucity of evidence: while thousands of ancient Greek and Latin inscriptions bear witness to the benefaction system through dedicatory and honorific formulae, there are only about 100 known Old Syriac inscriptions.[23] Most of these inscriptions, moreover, are funerary, and thus offer little evidence for private or public benefaction.

As I argued in the introduction, boundaries of language and culture between the Syriac-speaking regions of the Roman Empire and the rest of the ancient Mediterranean world were more porous than many scholars have previously thought. Although Ephrem was probably not a literate reader of Greek, he lived, as Sebastian Brock puts it, "in a milieu that was already considerably Hellenized."[24] It is reasonable to expect that the Syriac-speaking regions of the Roman Empire had similar social expectations and norms for the patron–client relationship. But what is the evidence for this claim?

Syriac epigraphical sources are indeed quite sparse. Greek was the primary language of public inscriptions throughout the entirety of the Levant well into late antiquity.[25] Nevertheless, there is still a small amount of evidence for the prevalence of benefaction ideology expressed in Syriac.[26] A mosaic from the late second or early third century found at Edessa depicts a group of people,

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23   I.e., inscriptions from 1–300 CE. See Drijvers and Healey, *Old Syriac Inscriptions*; Sebastian Brock, "Edessene Syriac Inscriptions in Late Ancient Syria," in *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East*, ed. Hannah M. Cotton, Robert G. Hoyland, Jonathan J. Price, and David J. Wasserstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

24   Brock, "Greek Words in Ephrem and Narsai," 449.

25   See the summary of the epigraphic evidence in Fergus Millar, "Ethnic Identity in the Roman Near East, A.D. 325–450: Language, Religion, and Culture," repr. in *Rome, the Greek World, and the East: Volume 3: the Greek World, the Jews, and the East*, ed. Hannah M. Cotton and Guy M. Rogers (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 388–390.

26   Dijkstra has identified the Aramaic inscriptional formula *'al ḥayy* (found in Syriac, Palmyrene, Hatran, and Nabatean inscriptions from antiquity) as embedded within the patronage and benefaction social structures characteristic of the wider Roman world, with its meaning shifting depending on the social status of the dedicator vis à vis the beneficiary of the dedicatory inscription. A social inferior dedicator makes his dedication as an act of loyalty and reciprocal gift-giving to his social superior, while a social superior offers his dedication as a benefaction to those of lower status (thus implying the need for honors in return). (Dijkstra, *Life and Loyalty*, 295).

with a larger male figure in the middle. This central figure is probably to be identified with the "Abgar" of the Syriac dedicatory inscription accompanying the image. Most scholars have concluded that this is a contemporaneous depiction of King Abgar VIII (Abgar bar Maʿnu).[27] Barsimya, the man who commissioned the mosaic, dedicated his family tomb "for the life of Abgar, my lord and benefactor" (ʿal ḥâyy abgar mār[y] w-ʿâbed ṭābāt[y]).[28] By placing the king at the center of his family portrait and dedicating the tomb in his honor, Barsimya sought to position himself as a loyal client of Abgar. In this way, he reciprocated the many favors that he undoubtedly received from his benefactor. As Dijkstra argues, by using the formulaic phrase "for the life of" with reference to Abgar rather than himself, the dedicator (as was typical), Barsimya conveyed that the tomb's construction should accrue to his benefactor's benefit, not his own.[29]

In 359 or 360, a new Christian baptistery was erected in Ephrem's hometown of Nisibis, marked with a Greek inscription memorializing Bishop Vologeses and a priest named Akepsimas (whose "zeal" it credits with the completion of the project).[30] Ephrem would have almost certainly been present for the dedication of this remarkable structure, which demonstrates, for our purposes, how the Christians of Nisibis drew on widespread practices of memorializing important benefactors (most importantly the bishop, but also this otherwise unknown priest, who may have been wealthy or involved in raising funds for the construction from wealthy congregants) through inscriptions. The high level of

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27   Those who reject this view, notably J.B. Segal, argue that "Abgar" is neither explicitly identified in the text nor depicted in the image as a king. For a summary of the debate, see Drijvers and Healey, *Old Syriac Inscriptions*, 187.

28   Am10 in Drijvers and Healey, *Old Syriac Inscriptions*, 185. A similar expression "my lord/lady and benefactor" appears in several other Old Syriac inscriptions: a mid-second-century cave inscription at Sumatar Harabesi accompanying an artistic depiction of two figures (As47 in Drijvers and Healey, *Old Syriac Inscriptions*, 128); another mid-second-century cave inscription (accompanying an image) at Sumatar Harabesi in honor of the emperor's freedman Aurelius Ḥapsay (As49 in Drijvers and Healey, *Old Syriac Inscriptions*, 132); and an Edessene column inscription from the mid-third century, in which Queen Shalmat is identified by the one who erected the pillar as "my lady and my benefactor" (ܡܪܬܝ ܘܥܒܕܬ ܛܒܬܝ) (As1 in Drijvers and Healey, *Old Syriac Inscriptions*, 45).

29   Dijkstra, *Life and Loyalty*, 258.

30   For the Greek text, see Jacques Jarry, "Inscriptions syriaques et arabes inédites du Ṭūr ʿAbdīn [avec 17 planches]," *Annales islamologiques* 10 (1972): 207–250, 243. For a thorough analysis of the structure, see Justine Gaborit and Gérard Thébault, with Abdurrahman Oruç, "L'église Mar-Yaʿqub de Nisibe," in *Les églises en monde syriaque*, ed. Francoise Briquel-Chatonnet, Études syriaques 10 (Paris: Geuthner, 2013), 289–330.

technical expertise and design features evident in the structure suggests that the church of Nisibis was able to hire skilled workers from Hatra or Palmyra even in the midst of decades of intermittent warfare, a testament to the wealth of Nisibis in the early fourth century.[31] The apparent economic prosperity of the Christians of Nisibis and the epigraphic dedication to the bishop and priest aligns with Ephrem's portrayal of the bishops of Nisibis as benefactors of the Christian community and his own patrons.[32] This could have also shaped how Ephrem imagined God's relationship to the faithful.

Ephrem likewise drew upon the norms of his society to frame the divine–human relationship. He identified God as "Father," "Lord," and "King," titles which in Syria and Mesopotamia, as in the rest of the Mediterranean world, were charged with the social expectations of the patronage system.[33] In his study of inscriptions on the Syrian and Mesopotamian frontiers, Klaas Dijkstra rightly observes: "In a society permeated with the mechanisms of patronage and euergetism, all status and wealth is eventually derived from the rulers."[34] Local rulers and officials drew their privileges from others (like the emperor) and then distributed their own favors in turn. In this social context, what would it mean (and how should one respond) if a king or prince showed favor by paying one's debt? How should one reciprocate the generous gift of a wealthy benefactor? In antiquity, such questions belonged to the realm of patronage and benefaction. For a late ancient Syriac-speaking Christian like Ephrem, God stood at the top of the pyramid of benefaction, the source of all wealth, status, and power, for even the emperor.

Having offered some evidence for the social practices of benefaction in northern Mesopotamia, we should also address the specific issue of debt payment or debt forgiveness. To begin, let us examine a Syriac legal document, P. Euphrates 19. This document, one of only three known Old Syriac parchment manuscripts to survive, is a transfer of debt dated to December 28,

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31   Widad Khoury, "Churches in Syriac Space: Architectural and Liturgical Context and Development," in *The Syriac World*, ed. Daniel King (London: Routledge, 2019), 531.

32   In the collection of poems celebrating the four bishops of Nisibis during Ephrem's lifetime (Jacob, Babu, Vologeses, and Abraham), Ephrem portrays the bishops as shepherds of the flock, stewards of the divine treasury, fathers of the church of Nisibis. For the church of Nisibis, these bishops offered various "benefits" (ܟ̈ܐܬܝܘܢ; *Nis*. 16.15). Even after death, the three deceased bishops are imagined as heavenly benefactors whose prayers will be efficacious for the "sinner" Ephrem (*Nis*. 14.25). The poet positions himself as a student of the "masters."

33   For a discussion of these (and other) titles in the context of benefaction (at least in Greek), see Neyrey, "God, Benefactor and Patron," 471–475.

34   Dijkstra, *Life and Loyalty*, 258.

240.[35] Although its exact provenance is unknown, it was probably found at Appadana-Neapolis, north of Dura-Europos.[36] While the text is not directly relevant to the subject of debt forgiveness, it offers a glimpse nonetheless into the social and legal world of the region a century before Ephrem. In this legal document, a slave, Baʿišu, representing his master Šaʿidu, states that his master has been unable to obtain the agreed-upon repayment of a loan (apparently an item, although the text is obscure) Šaʿidu made to another man (also named Baʿišu) within the timeframe stipulated by their original written agreement.[37] The document then describes a proceeding in which Šaʿidu transfers the loan to another man, Worod, who repays it and assumes the responsibility of demanding repayment from the original borrower.

This document raises many questions. Why did Šaʿidu make the original loan without charge?[38] Who was Worod, and why was the debt transferred to him? Was he a person of higher social standing who could demand repayment of the loan more effectively than Šaʿidu?[39] We can imagine many of these sorts of situations playing out regularly across the region of northern Mesopotamia, their documentation lost to the ravages of time. This scrap of parchment provides just one small example. Interestingly, though, it presents us with a case of a loan gone wrong, an item not returned, and a debt accrued. The document does not give us any indication of the social relationships between the persons involved, but it provides fertile soil for the historical imagination. If, for example, Worod was a local man of note, a person of higher social standing than the borrower Baʿišu, he could have (hypothetically) chosen to cancel the loan and therefore position himself as a benefactor of the borrower Baʿišu. He could

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35   See the text and translation in Drijvers and Healey, *Old Syriac Inscriptions*, 237–242.

36   Aaron M. Butts, "Old Syriac Documents," in *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage: Electronic Edition*, edited by Sebastian P. Brock, Aaron M. Butts, George A. Kiraz and Lucas Van Rompay (Gorgias Press, 2011; online ed. Beth Mardutho, 2018), https://gedsh .bethmardutho.org/Old-Syriac-documents.

37   John Healey convincingly argues that ܪܒܥܐ (an obscure word) refers to some kind of movable item, not very expensive, but of great value to the lender (he speculates that it was some kind of farm equipment). ("Some Lexical and Legal Notes on a Syriac Loan Transfer of 240 CE," in *Malphono w-Rabo d-Malphone: Studies in Honor of Sebastian P. Brock*, ed. George. A. Kiraz [Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2009], 215).

38   Healey places the document within the Roman legal category of *commodatum*, "the deposit or loan of an item allowing use of the item without charge." He suggests that this kind of less formal arrangement might indicate that the lender and borrower were family members or friends. ("Some Lexical and Legal Notes," 214).

39   Healey suggests Worod might have been a professional debt collector ("Some Lexical and Legal Notes," 213).

have thus placed himself in a position to receive honor and other reciprocal benefits from this new client.

It should be clear now how the payment of debts could serve as a fundamental expression of beneficence on the part of social elites.[40] This was the case throughout the ancient Mediterranean world, and it was particularly true of rulers. To cite an especially famous example, the Greek text inscribed on the Rosetta Stone (196 BCE) in honor of Ptolemy V Epiphanes attests to this sort of benefaction. After an introduction, the inscription lauds Ptolemy for his generosity (εὐεργετικῶς):

> He has used all of the power at his command to favor (πεφιλανθρώπηκε) us with his kindness … He has forgiven (ἀφῆκεν) the huge indebtedness (ὀφειλήματα) that the people in Egypt and those in the rest of his kingdom owed the crown and has cancelled charges against those who were led off to prison.[41]

These actions of debt forgiveness and criminal amnesty are indicative of the "favor" of the king toward his kingdom, and represent common forms of public benefaction for Greco-Roman elites. Public honorific inscriptions such as this also reveal the two-sided nature of ancient benefaction: those who erected them returned their gratitude to the benefactor in a manner that was prominent and visible.[42] They served as manifest examples of "remembrance" (Lat. *memoria* or Gr. μνεία), the act which Seneca described as essential to the necessary "repayment" of "gratitude" from those who have received benefactions.[43]

Although Syriac inscriptions of this sort are lacking, Syriac historical sources record rulers carrying out similar deeds of beneficence. The sixth-century *Chronicle of Edessa* (likely drawing on archival Edessene court documents), for example, recounts that after the great flood of 201 CE, King Abgar VIII of Edessa (the same ruler memorialized in Barsimya's dedicatory mosaic) took decisive

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40   Anderson's interpretation of Jesus' parable of the creditor and the two debtors (Luke 7:41–42) is a helpful summary of these ancient ideas, expressed, as he puts it, in the original "Semitic idiom" (Anderson, *Sin*, 112).

41   Ed. W. Dittenberger, *Orientis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae*, 90 (accessed at http://epigraphy .packhum.org/text/219002); trans. Danker, *Benefactor*, 208.

42   See Harrison, *Paul's Language of Grace*, 40–42.

43   Atqui nihil magis praestandum est, quam ut memoria nobis meritorum haereat, quae subinde reficienda est, quia nec referre potest graiam, nisi qui meminit et, qui meminit, eam refert (Seneca, *De ben.* 2.24.1, LCL 310: 98).

action to "re-establish the former tranquility (*šaynāh*)" of the city.[44] The *Chronicle* summarizes his actions as follows:

> King Abgar ordered that unpaid taxes from those who were inside the
> city and from those who dwelt in the villages and the farms should be
> remitted, and that taxes should be suspended from them for five years
> until the city had grown rich in its population and adorned with its buildings.[45]

Abgar's work to restore the damage of the flood of the Daysan River thus included public cancellation of unpaid taxes (described in the Syriac as "debts of tribute"—*ḥawbātâ d-tab'tâ*). Ephrem imagined Jesus' payment of debt in a particular historical context, in which debt payment or cancellation was the province of social and political elites.

2.4 *Patronage and Benefaction and Ephrem's Economic Imagination*

This context, I argue, fundamentally shaped Ephrem's portrayals of the debt payment of Jesus' Passion and death. The bestowal of favor or gifts was a central characteristic of a patron or benefactor. Ephrem frames this payment as an incredible act of *favor*, a supreme gift. In a stanza from one of the *madrāšê On Faith*, Ephrem envisions the Father and Son dispensing heavenly treasure to human beings. This particular poem warns against the dangers of "investigating" the divine, which is as incomprehensible to mortals as the absorption of water by tree branches, or the capacity of wood to fuel fire and dissolve into smoke (stanzas 1–3). Even more foolishly, Ephrem argues, these theological "investigators" do not wish to acknowledge "the King's Son," despite the obvious benefits he has offered:

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44   This Chalcedonian text, which survives only in a single seventh-century manuscript (Vat. syr. 163), was written around 540. See Muriél Debié and David G.K. Taylor, "Syriac and Syro-Arabic Historical Writing, C. 500–c. 1400," in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing, Vol. 2: 400–1400*, ed. Sarah Foot and Chase Frederick Robinson, Oxford History of Historical Writing (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 159; Sebastian Brock, "Syriac Historical Writing: A Survey of the Main Sources," *Journal of the Iraqi Academy* (*Syriac Corporation*) 5 (1979): 3–4.

45   ܗܘܐ ܗܟܢܐ ܡܠܟܐ ܐܒܓܪ ܦܩܕ ܠܟܠܗܘܢ ܕܝܢ ܕܒܓܘ ܡܕܝܢܬܐ ܘܕܒܩܘܪܝܐ ܘܒܐܓܘܪܣܐ ܕܚܘܒܬܐ ܕܬܒܥܬܐ. (ed. Ignazio Guidi, *Chronica Minora, Pars Prior*, CSCO 3, Syr. 4 [Paris: Typographeo Reipublicae, 1903]; trans. Segal, *Edessa, "The Blessed City"* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970], 25).

[*Fid.* 58.11] Our King and our King's Son opened the treasure and scat-
tered

the good things of the Kingdom. Two worlds he has given us,

[one] that passes away, and [one] that will remain. And because his
mercy

surpassed his gift, the King lifted up

and gave us the King's Son—a gift for his beloved—

and killed him and saved us through him.[46]

The language and imagery of this passage (the idea of the royal treasury in
heaven) are relatively common elsewhere in Ephrem's metrical *mêmrê* and
madrāšê, as well as artistic prose texts like the *Mêmrâ on our Lord*.[47] For this
very reason, we should pause and consider what this imagery suggests. Ephrem
envisions a great heavenly "treasure" (*gazzâ*) from which the divine royal bene-
factor continues to dispense "gifts" (*mawhbātâ*) and "benefits" (*ʿûdrānê*) to cre-
ation.[48] Some of these other gifts are highlighted in stanza 8 of this poem and
fit well with other ancient portrayals of divine benefactors: creation, nourish-
ment, status as God's child, and invitation to the divine "table."[49] The greatest
of these gifts is that of the "King's Son," given over to death for the salvation of
humanity.

When we see Ephrem speak of "gifts" and "benefits" from God to humanity
(a highly unequal relationship) we should imagine this gift-giving within the
framework of ancient benefaction and patronage. In the context of the social
patterns and expectations of gift-giving in the late antique Mediterranean and
Near East, the bestowal of gifts established an ongoing reciprocity between the
two parties.[50] After the higher status patron displayed his benevolence by giv-

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46 ܟܠܡ ܡܢ ܟܠܡ ܟܪ݁ܐ ܗܦܘ ܦܘܕ ܘܒܙܐ \ ܠܒܕܟ ܘܟܠܗܘܐܕܐ ܐܩܡ ܟܠܚܡ ܡܕ ܠܡ \ ܐܚܕܐ
    ܘܪܘܗܘܐ ܘܨܝܠܠ ܪܚܕܐ ܠܗ݂ \ ܐܣܚܕܗ ܠܚܘܗܘܕ ܟܠܗܟ ܠܒܙ ܟܠܟܟ \ ܥܡܠܟ
    ܗܢ ܘܣܘܡ ܠܡ ܟܗܘܒܬܟ ܠܣܚܕܚ \ ܘܡܠܟܠ ܗܩܡܟ ܟܟ (ed. Beck, *Fid.*, 181; trans. adapted
    from Wickes, *Hymns on Faith*, 295).

47 See *SdDN* 9.3, 55.

48 For Ephrem's use of ܟܗܘܒܬܟ, see, e.g., *Fid.* 5.20, 10.1, 10.22, 16.2, 25.2, 25.16, 54.5, 85.1,
    86.10,13,21; *Azym.* 15.31, 20.14; *Ieiun.* 6.4; *Eccl.* 26.1, 29.5. For examples of Ephrem's use of
    the word ܟܪܝܢܟ, see *Ieiun.* 4.1, 6.2; *Azym.* 1.15, 2.3; *Eccl.* 26.1. Ephrem also speaks of Christ
    specifically as "treasurer" (ܟܝܕ݂ܟ) of the heavenly treasure (see *Virg.* 31.2; *SdDN* 54). For
    more on this and the related title "steward" (ܟܒܚ ܒܝ) see Murray, *Symbols*, 193–195. Cf.
    Aphrahat, *Dem.* 10.8, 14.44.

49 These correlate to common titles of deity which express benefaction ideas, as summarized
    by Neyrey, particularly "King," "Creator," "Father," and "Savior." (Neyrey, "God, Benefactor
    and Patron," 471–474).

50 See DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*, 104–106.

ing a gift or paying his client's debt (or some other act of generosity), the client then incurred further relational obligations.

"Pagan," Jewish, and Christian thinkers alike consciously applied this reciprocal framework to the divine–human relationship. It was commonplace in antiquity to view the interactions between humans and gods through the lens of the social patterns of benefaction. For many adherents of traditional cults, the gods, being bound to this reciprocal pattern, were thought to confer rewards and goodwill upon those who engage in cultic practices. For both the client and the worshipper, the chief obligation was gratitude (Gr. χάρις, εὐχαριστία; Lat. *gratia*).[51] Such a view also became standard in Greek-speaking Judaism and Christianity. As divine benefactor, God was due gratitude and praise from his worshippers.[52] For instance, a text of uncertain authorship but attributed to Origen, speaks of humans as *indebted* to God for his many gifts, and lists among the obligations due him "praise," "blessing," "thanksgiving," "worship," and "service".[53] For Ephrem, too, to conceive of the saving Passion and death of Jesus as a "gift" from a divine patron was to connect his redemptive benefits to the responsibilities of those who have been redeemed.[54]

In the opening and closing stanzas of individual *madrāšê*, Ephrem often portrays himself as a supplicant client, able to request and even expect divine favor.[55] Jeffrey Wickes describes this as Ephrem's "economic I"—with the poet presenting his own poetic speech within a framework of divine and human exchange.[56] Among these divine gifts is the payment of the poet's debts, as we can see in this example from the opening of *On the Church* 26:

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51 See Neyrey, "God, Benefactor and Patron," 486–489. Seneca, for example, claims that no crime is as common and terrible as ingratitude (*ingratia*). (*De beneficiis* 1.11; Cf. Plutarch, *Mor.*, 470C).

52 See Neyrey, "God: Benefactor and Patron," 484. For examples, see *Ep. Arist.* 211; 2 Macc 14:35–36; Philo, *Vit. Mos.* 1.157; Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 4.17.1; Justin, *1 Ap.* 10. Ephrem also affirms that although God needs nothing from his creation (see *Nat.* 4.203–205; *Fid.* 26.15, 35.6, 85.12), the necessary response to God is thanksgiving and praise. As he writes in *Eccl.* 29.3, "Whoever has withdrawn from the song of your praise (ܬܫܒܘܚܬܟ), / his mouth is like a dumb mouth" (ed. Beck, *Eccl.*, 71).

53 Origen, *Selectiones in Psalmos* 144.1 (PG 12), cited in Messer, "God and Gift," 166.

54 Wickes identifies ܡܘܗܒܬܐ, along with ܓܙܐ ("treasure"), ܓܙܒܪܐ ("treasurer"), and ܚܘܒܐ ("debt") as the most commonly used economic terms in Ephrem's poetry. See Wickes, *Bible and Poetry*, 65.

55 See, e.g., *Fid.* 5.20, 10.1; *Cruc.* 6.20; *Res.* 5.1; *Eccl.* 13.1, 15.1, 29.1–6, 30. For a close analysis of Ephrem's first-person statements in *Fid.* 10, see Wickes, "The Poetics of Self-Presentation."

56 Wickes, *Bible and Poetry*, 65.

[*Eccl.* 26.1] Water me, Lord, by your spring!
Enrich my mind by your gift!
Clothe me too in a breastplate,
one which guards the soul within.
Multiply for me, as the Good One, all our benefits!
Bestow upon me too, the drug that will heal me.
Even my spots will whiten through you!
Pay down my debts from your treasure.[57]

Ephrem's chain of requests ("enrich me," "clothe me," "multiply for me," "bestow upon me," "whiten my spots," and "pay down my debts") sound much like the appeals of a client to his patron.[58] Entreaties for healing, provision, and financial benefit align well with the types of benefits generally provided by ancient benefactors.[59]

We should also read Ephrem's economic language in light of the biblical models he used, especially the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14–30 et par.). In this parable, a man who is about to depart for a journey entrusts his slaves with "talents," that he expects them to grow through investment and return to him. The parable is itself reflective of a patronage system (in this case between a master and his enslaved workers). Ephrem likewise portrayed his own economic actions of returning divine gifts to the treasury as imitations of the actions of his benefactor, the bishop of Nisibis, the "shepherd," and "master."[60] In an echo of the parable of the talents, he depicted Bishop Abraham as "the merchant of our flock, who multiplied the talent of your teaching".[61] Through his wise investment, the bishop revealed himself to be an ideal client of his divine patron, and Ephrem in turn, sought to frame himself (and the church of Nisibis) as the child of this "father."[62]

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57   ܐܫܩܝܢܝ ܡܪܝ ܡܢ ܡܒܘܥܝܟ ܐܥܬܪ ܐܦ ܪܥܝܢܝ ܡܢ ܡܘܗܒܬܟ ܐܠܒܫܝܢܝ ܐܦ ܫܪܝܢܐ ܐܟ
        ܕܢܛܪ ܢܦܫܐ ܕܠܓܘ ܐܣܓܐ ܠܝ ܐܝܟ ܛܒܐ ܠܢ ܟܠܗ ܝܘܬܪܢܝܢ ܐܫܟܢ ܠܝ ܐܦ ܗܘ ܣܡܐ ܕܡܐܣܐ ܠܝ
        ܐܦ ܚܘܡܪܬܝ ܒܟ ܢܚܘܪܢ ܐܦܪܘܥ ܚܘܒܝ ܡܢ ܣܝܡܬܟ \ (ed. Beck, *Eccl.*, 58–59).

58   The format of this poem is an alphabetical acrostic: all the lines of each stanza begin with a particular letter of the alphabet—in this case, the letter *âlaph*. Therefore, the long chain of causative verbs beginning with *âlaph* make sense from a structural perspective as well.

59   According to the epigraphical survey of Danker, typical expressions of benefaction included deliverance from oppression, debt forgiveness and criminal amnesty, promotion of stability and peace, liberation from slavery, healing, and monetary contributions. See Danker, *Benefactor*, 393–409. See also Messer, "God and Gift," 73–91.

60   See *Nis.* 17.1 (ed. Beck, *Nis. 1*, 45–46).

61   ܗ ܐܠܦܐ ܕܡܪܥܝܬܢ ܕܐܘܪܒ ܟܟܪ ܝܘܠܦܢܟ (*Nis.* 17.1; ed. Beck, *Nis. 1*, 45–46).

62   See *Nis.* 16.21.

Ephrem inhabited a world of dizzying wealth and staggering poverty. In stark contrast with our modern democratic notion that power flows upward from the people, in Ephrem's world, power (and wealth and access) dripped down from the elites. Those of higher status entered into relationship with those of lower rank and offered them favors. Ephrem likewise imagined the debt-paying death of Jesus as a benevolent expression of divine favor toward humanity—an economic, but relational action, befitting a ruler's actions toward his subjects. He portrayed himself, the poet, as another actor in this relational nexus—a patron expecting further gifts and returning favors of his own. As we will see, Ephrem saw the death of Jesus as a moment that initiated this new relationship between God and humanity, one which involved social expectations for giver and recipient alike.

3   The Passion as Debt Payment in Publicly Performed Poetry

In addition to situating Ephrem's economic imagery for the death of Jesus within a particular social and historical context, it is also essential to engage with it in the distinct literary and performative contexts of Ephrem's writings. These contexts are not incidental, but shape Ephrem's approach and rhetorical priorities. In the following sections, I will explore Ephrem's depictions of the debt-paying power of the Passion in liturgically or para-liturgically performed *mêmrê* and *madrāšê*. It is important to note that such texts are far from systematic in their use of the Bible or development of theological themes. In these writings, references to the debt-paying power of the Passion most frequently appear as stereotyped affirmations. For instance, in one of the festal *madrāšê On the Nativity*, Ephrem writes:

> [*Nat.* 21.19] And as he began in birth, he continued and completed in death.
> His birth received worship; his death paid the debt.[63]

This stanza presents a unity between the events of Jesus' birth and death in the broadest terms. Ephrem does not cite any specific passages or events connected with the Passion narrative. The phrasing "his death paid the debt" has no discernible point of origin in the known Syriac versions of the New Testament, yet variations of it are common throughout Ephrem's corpus.

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63   ܘܐܝܟ ܕܫܪܝ ܒܡܘܠܕܐ ܗܟܢ ܐܘܚܪ ܘܐܫܠܡ ܡܘܬܐ | ܡܘܠܕܗ ܩܒܠ ܣܓܕܬܐ ܡܘܬܗ ܦܪܥ ܚܘܒܬܐ
       (ed. Beck, *HNat*, 108).

In the *mêmrê* and *madrāšê*, Ephrem's engagement with the theme of Jesus' redemptive death is typically vague and allusive. His use of Col 2:14 is instructive. This is undoubtedly the most important passage for Ephrem's understanding of Jesus' death as a payment for debt.[64] In the Syriac Peshitta version, the passage describes Christ as "blotting out" (*ʿaṭṭâ*) the "bond of our debt" (*šṭar ḥawbayn*), language which Ephrem frequently echoes but never discusses in depth. For instance, in *Cruc.* 9, he writes, "For his release [from debt] (*šûbqāneh*) cut up our bond."[65] Notice that Ephrem employs a different verb—*qadded* ("cut up") in place of *ʿaṭṭâ* ("blot out")—leaving "our bond" (*ešṭaran*) the only echo of the biblical text. This allusive use of the Colossians passage is generally representative of Ephrem's engagement with the subject of the redemptive effects of Jesus' death in his *mêmrê* and *madrāšê*. While he affirms that Jesus' death "blotted out" (*ʿaṭṭâ*) or "paid" (*praʿ*) human debt, he does not typically elaborate on the issue through detailed exegesis of the Passion narrative.

This lack of exegetical clarity was probably due to the performative contexts of the liturgically-oriented *mêmrê* and *madrāšê*. Ephrem's goal in these writings was not to articulate a detailed and systematic theology of redemption, but to draw the audience into a redemptive drama. His liturgical texts invite their hearers into a dramatic arc spanning from the creation and Passion narratives, from Adam to Jesus.

3.1   *The Debt of Adam and Its Payment*

In the redemptive drama of Ephrem's *madrāšê*, the climax of the story of the debt payment was inextricably linked to its beginning. Ephrem traces the origins of humanity's debt to the disobedience of Adam and Eve.[66] Though he was not the first to make this claim (which appears over a century earlier in the writings of Irenaeus of Lyons), his poems add new layers to the idea.[67] It is not surprising that early Christian writers would come to such a conclusion; the "bond of our debt" mentioned in Col 2:14 raises questions regarding the beginnings of that debt, its participants, and its terms.[68]

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64   P: ܘܥܛܐ ܠܐܫܛܪ ܚܘܒܝܢ ܗܘ ܕܣܩܘܒܠܢ ܗܘܐ ܒܦܘܩܕܢܘܗܝ ܘܫܩܠܗ ܡܢ ܡܨܥܬܐ ܘܩܒܥܗ ܒܙܩܝܦܗ ("And by his commandments, he blotted out the bond of our debts which was against us, and took it from the midst, and nailed it to his cross.") See Anderson, *Sin* 113–115.

65   *Cruc.* 9.2 (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 77).

66   See Gary A. Anderson, *The Genesis of Perfection: Adam and Eve in Jewish and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 165; idem, *Sin*, 113–120. See also Gribomont, "Le triomphe de Pâques," 183–184. Cf. *Fid.* 35.5–6.

67   See Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 5.17.

68   Anderson explores how the later Syriac poets Narsai and Jacob of Serug developed the idea of the "bond" in *Sin*, 120–130.

Ephrem's clearest statement of the origin of humanity's "debt contract" comes in *On Nisibis* 48, a poem that offers an array of biblical and natural symbols for the resurrection of the body. In one stanza, he envisions a contractual agreement between Adam, death, and sin following Adam's transgression:

> [*Nis.* 48.9] Adam returned to his earth and made a contract.
> He wrote [it] and became deeply indebted to death and sin.
> Through the transgression of the commandment he sealed the pledge.
> Our Lord came and saved him and raised him up.
> Death rewrote [the contract], and Sheol stood surety with it,
> that all those whom they had plundered and snatched away would be
>   returned at the resurrection.[69]

In this account, Ephrem draws upon the imagery of the marketplace to link the primal sin of Adam in Paradise to the new economic order instituted by Christ. Ephrem depicts Adam's sin as a binding financial document (*dîyatîqî*) by which he became "indebted" (*ḥāb*) to Sin and Death. He imagines Adam having to sell himself into debt slavery to these powers, making a pledge (*meškānâ*) from which he would be unable to escape. Although the Syriac words used here are different, the idea reflects the influence of the "document of debt" from Colossians.[70] Said contract came to an end with Christ, who rescued Adam from Death and Sin and, as his representative (or patron), brought about a new agreement.[71] In Ephrem's description of this new agreement we can envision the personified Death (and its business associate, Sheol) forced into a disagreeable arrangement with Christ that would ensure the future resurrection of all of the dead. The network of metaphors at work here portrays for Ephrem's audience in familiar terms the overwhelming power of Jesus' death to alter the fate of the entire human race.

In the final stanza of *Eccl.* 51, Ephrem presents the events of Jesus' Passion as the direct payment of Adam's debt, aligning the two narratives even to the day:

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69 ܐܡܪ ܗܘܐ ܠܥܦܪܗ ܥܕܡܐ ܘܥܒܕ ܐܝܟܐ ܘܐܬܒ ܐܬܒܐ܆ ܘܚܒ ܣܓܝ ܠܡܘܬܐ ܘܠܚܛܝܬܐ ܥܕܡܐ ܒܥܘܒܪ (ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 63).

70 The language here is also reminiscent of that found in the Syriac legal parchment P. Euphrates 20 (dated 242), a document formalizing the lease of property. That document mentions a "document of pledge" (*šṭārâ d-meškākûtâ*) as proof of a transfer of land ownership. (Drijvers and Healey, *Old Syriac Inscriptions*, 243).

71 Cf. *Nis.* 36, where Ephrem imagines Adam imprisoned in Sheol, unable to be rescued. The

[*Eccl.* 51.8] In the month of April our Lord repaid
  the debts of the first Adam.
In April, he gave sweat in place of the sweat of Adam,
  the cross in place of his tree,
  and the Friday in place of the Friday.[72]

If, as we saw in a previous example, Adam incurred his debt through his disobe-
dience in Eden, then it would be fitting that the payment of that debt by Adam's
divine patron would also encompass other aspects of the narrative of Adam's
sin, such as the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and the sweat resulting from
the divine curse (Gen 3:17). Ephrem does not fully develop his articulation of
these concepts; rather, the larger goal of this passage is to draw symbolic asso-
ciations between Adam and Jesus, the primal sin and the redemption, and to
demonstrate that Jesus' deeds in the Passion occurred "in place of" (*ḥlāp*) the
events of the Genesis narrative. These parallels extend even to the timing of the
two events: both Adam's sin in Paradise and the Passion of Jesus took place on
a Friday in April. This poem's focus upon these two biblical narratives may be
a consequence of its performative setting. The previous four stanzas reference
the paschal feast, making it likely that the poem was composed for that festal
season, and lending a certain appropriateness to the final stanza's elucidation
of the symbolic relationship of the Paradise and Passion narratives.[73] That per-
formative context also draws Ephrem's audience into the drama of creation and
redemption. On a Friday in April, they too become participants through their
enactment of the Passion in liturgy.

In a stanza from *On the Crucifixion* 4, Ephrem offers another perspective on
the relationship between Jesus' suffering and Adam's debt:

[*Cruc.* 4.9] And when they cried out against him and scourged him, they
    did not realize
  that he was repaying the scourging
  of that heir who was corrupted and sinned in Eden.
  You are the Lord, who had compassion on his slave lest he be scourged,

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personfied figure of Death boasts of his rightful claim over Adam and tells Jesus that no
    one can pay his debt.

72 ܚܒܘܢ ܢܫܡ ܦܘܕ ܟܘܕ ܟܘܡ ܚܢܢ ‖ ܣܘܐܬܘܗ ܐܪܬܟܪ ܡܪܬܟܐ ‖ ܢܘܕ ܕܐܕܟܬܟ ܚܠܢܡ ܣܠܟ
    ܟܘܚܘܐܬ ܡܘܕ ‖ ܘܐܪܙܪ [ܘܐܣܝܟܐ] ‖ ܘܐܪܙܪ ܡܘܕܐܬ (ed.
    Beck, *Eccl.*, 132–133). For the idea that Adam's creation and fall occurred on a Friday, see
    also *Fid.* 6.7, *Cruc.* 7.11f, *Nat.* 4.110, *Par.* 12.10.

73 For more on this, see the next chapter.

and presented your Son and scourged him in his place.
Heaven and earth, and everything in them,
are too small to give thanks for this![74]

Here, Ephrem draws upon the imagery of debt payment to describe the scourg-
ing of Jesus in John 19:1. He suggests the scourging of Adam (described as
"the heir") was "repaid" (*pra'*) by the scourging of Jesus. This interpretation
is distinct from later western theologies, which often portray Christ's vicar-
ious suffering in terms of the abstract sense of bearing the wrath of God.
Instead, Ephrem's language implies that the punishment Jesus endured on
Adam's behalf was the specific, physical punishment of scourging, like that
of a disobedient slave. Adam had disobeyed in Paradise, and Jesus suffered
for him by accepting the penalty.[75] Ephrem presents God as a remarkable
master, one willing to offer his own son to accept this lashing on Adam's
behalf.

Ephrem does not fully develop these aspects of his portrayal of the Pas-
sion, especially in his *mêmrê* and *madrāšê*. When he does engage with the
redemptive debt payment of Jesus' Passion and death, Ephrem does so not as
an abstract theological question to be explained, but as a crucial element of
a great story into which he draws his audience. As such, he tends to empha-
size the Adam-Christ relationship, and does not develop questions such as the
nature or recipient of the debt payment. Such issues are irrelevant to the objec-
tives of these liturgically performed writings.

3.2   *Reciprocity and Human Participation in the Payment of Debt*

In other *mêmrê* and *madrāšê*, Ephrem depicts a number of activities (such as
repentance, baptismal anointing, and the Eucharist) as redemptive or capable
of removing human debt. For Ephrem, the concurrence of these two types of
redemptive actions—the payment of debt by Jesus' death, and the removal of
debt by the faithful deeds of Christian believers—was no contradiction. Rather,
these two aspects of debt payment fit together within a larger divine-human
relational framework. God as the royal and heavenly benefactor offered himself
in Jesus' Passion and death in order to pay down debt; human beings respond
with holiness and obedience and therefore "blot out" their own debts.

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74   ܘܩܡ ܠܒܘܫܗ ܘܐܠܒܫܗ, ܘܡܢܗ ܐܠ, ܟܪ ܝܒ ܠ ܐܠܗܟ ܗܘܘ ܒܐ ܟ ܒܪܝܐ ܕܐ ܟܠ ܐ ܒܪܗ ܐ ܠܒܘܫܬܗ\
      ܘܡܪܩܗ ܘܡܢܝ ܠܒܝܗ ܕܠܗ ܐܠܗ ܥܕܟܐ ܒܠ ܡ ܕܟܐ ܘܡ ܐ ܟ ܠܡ \ ܐܘ \ ܚܒܝ ܡܩܗܘ (ed.
      Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 57). For a parallel passage on Jesus' scourging, see *Azym.* 1.8.

75   See Hartung et al., trans., *Songs for the Fast and Pascha*, 144, note 37.

To take a brief example, the forty-sixth *Madrāšâ on Virginity* draws upon the story of Jonah to explore themes like human debt, repentance, and baptism. Midway through this poem, Ephrem envisions a great settling of accounts before the judgment seat, wherein the "bond of debts" (*ešṭar ḥawbê*), "silenced" by Christ, will "cry out" against each person. This language is taken from Col 2:14, a Pauline summary of the effects of Christ's crucifixion. Drawing further upon this passage, Ephrem shifts the biblical verb "blot out" (*nʿeṭṭê*) into the future and transforms it into an action effected by tears of repentance (rather than by Christ himself, as Col 2:14 has it).[76] Next, Ephrem discusses the relation of repentance to baptism. Baptism seems to be the initial point at which God applies the "payment" of debt through Christ's death to the Christian.[77] However, because sin persists, repentance, according to Ephrem, is a "washing" that can cleanse the baptized from the stains of post-baptismal sins. Thus, both baptism and repentance are themselves provisions for humanity by the just and gracious God.

This poem therefore envisions the human act of repentance as itself an example of divine beneficence for the continuing effects of sin after the forgiveness of pre-baptismal debts through the death of Jesus. In Ephrem's understanding, the gifts of the divine patron in paying human debts necessitate a reciprocal response from those who have received them. Yet the benefactions of God extend even to providing the means for that reciprocity.

3.3   *"Blotting out" Debt through Obedience: Ephrem's Reading of Col 2:14*
In *Virg.* 46 and elsewhere, Ephrem portrays actions such as repentance, fasting, the Eucharist, and baptismal anointing as able to "blot out" (*ʿaṭṭâ*) debt.[78] While these are certainly allusions to Col 2:14, they seem to contradict the plain meaning of that passage, which describes Christ "blotting out" the document

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76   For an almost-identical statement of the same idea, see *Pub.* 24: "I remembered the good Lord and gentle God, who wipes out the bond of the debtors' debts through tears" (ܕܚܠܬ ܐܟܬܒ ܒܚܘܒܐ ܣܟܡ ܗܘܬ ܐܝܟܪ) (ed. Brock, "Letter to Publius," 293–294). Similarly, in the *Mêmrâ on our Lord*, when commenting upon the "sinful woman" of Luke 7, Ephrem writes that she "blotted out (ܚܠܬ) the great bond of her debt (ܥܠܬ ܐܝܟܪ ܐܘܝܐ ܕܣܘܒܟܬܗ) with her meager tears (ܒܟܚܡܬ ܕܒܘܢܚܬܐ)" (ed. Beck, *SdDN*, 12–13; trans. Amar and Mathews, *Selected Prose Works*, 291).

77   For baptism itself "blotting out" debt, see *Repr.* 11, 555–563. In *Virg.* 7, Ephrem also describes the baptismal anointing oil as capable of "blotting out our debts in the likeness of the Gracious One." (ed. Beck, *Virg.*, 27; trans. adapted from McVey, *Hymns*, 295.)

78   *Eccl.* 32.2: "Blessed is he who has given us emancipation (ܚܐܘܪܐ) through his bread, / and has blotted out (ܚܠܬ) through his cup (ܒܟܣܗܗ) the bond of our debts (ܐܝܟܪ ܣܘܒܟܡ)." (ed. Beck, *Eccl.*, 79). For fasting, see *Ieiun.* 1.

of debt in the context of his crucifixion. The Greek text refers to "the record which stood against us with its legal demands" (NRSV), which scholars typically understand as a Pauline reference to the condemning power of the Law. Christ "blotted out" (ἐξαλείψας) this record and "nailed it to the cross" (προσηλώσας αὐτὸ τῷ σταυρῷ).[79] In the Greek, the action clearly and unambiguously belongs to Christ through his death, which makes Ephrem's use of the passage quite surprising.

Ephrem's use of the passage appears to find support in the more ambiguous Syriac text of Col 2:14.[80] It is possible to interpret the Syriac as a description of the means by which Christ "blotted out" that legal document: "And with his commandments, he blotted out the document of our debts" (w-ʿaṭṭâ b-pûqdānaw[hy] šṭar ḥawbayn hû).[81] Such a reading could shift the action of "blotting out" away from the crucifixion and toward Christ's teaching and institution of commandments (and by extension, toward following those commandments). As a result, human obedience to Christ's commands (like baptism, the Eucharist, and repentance), serves to "blot out the bond of debt." This, I believe, is Ephrem's understanding of the text, borne out by the many allusions to it across his writings. Indeed, he often uses the word "commandments" (pûqdānê) as shorthand to describe Christ's obligations for the lifestyle of the faithful. The most striking articulation of this appears in *Eccl.* 29, in which Ephrem evokes the Passion:

> [*Eccl.* 29.8] Let our neck[s], my Lord, bear your sweet yoke!
> Let your visible cross be hidden within us!
> Amen! And [let] the heart be crucified every day,
> and in place of the nails, nail into it the commandments.[82]

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79   UBS: Ἐξαλείψας τὸ καθ' ἡμῶν χειρόγραφον τοῖς δόγμασιν ὃ ἦν ὑπεναντίον ἡμῖν, καὶ αὐτὸ ἦρκεν ἐκ τοῦ μέσου προσηλώσας αὐτὸ τῷ σταυρῷ.

80   P: ܐܚܠܟ ܚܘܒܬܢ ܕܗܘܬ ܣܩܘܒܠܢ, ܗܘ ܫܛܪܐ ܕܐܫܬܪܝ, ܗܘ ܟܠܗ ܫܩܠܗ ܡܢ ܡܨܥܬܐ ܘܩܒܥܗ ܒܙܩܝܦܗ.

81   The Syriac legal parchment P. Euphrates 20 (dated 242) refers to a "document of pledge" (šṭārâ d-meškākûtâ) as proof of a transfer of land ownership. The term (šṭārâ) used by the Syriac New Testament translators and Ephrem had a real legal valence (Drijvers and Healey, *Old Syriac Inscriptions*, 243). For the origins of the "bond of debt" concept in Judaism and early Christianity, see Anderson, *Sin*, 113–118.

82   ܢܪܟܢ ܠܥܠܡ ܚܕܐ ܠܘܢ ܡܪܝ ܗܘ ܢܝܪܟ ܒܣܝܡܐ \ ܢܛܫܐ ܒܢ ܙܩܝܦܟ ܓܠܝܐ \ ܗܘ \ ܘܐܦ ܠܒܐ ܢܨܛܠܒ ܟܠ ܝܘܡ \ ܘܚܠܦ ܨܨܐ ܩܒܥ ܒܗ ܦܘܩܕܢܐ (ed. Beck, *Eccl.*, 71). This stanza is strongly reminiscent of the final of doxology of Romanos' *kontakion* "On the Victory of the Cross" (22.18). (Ed. Grosdidier de Matons, *Hymnes*, Vol. 3).

Notice the final line's use of the verb *qbaʿ* ("nail") and reference to the "commandments" (*pûqdānê*), both of which allude to the language of Col 2:14. In this stanza, Ephrem envisions the believer enacting the scene described in that text, and the Passion narrative itself, in an imitation of Jesus. He asks for Christ to place the "yoke" on the necks of the faithful (using the word *nîrâ* found in the Syriac versions of Matt 11:30). This metaphorical reconfiguring of the Passion also applies Christ's suffering to ordinary life, with the human heart symbolically "crucified" on a daily basis. Later in the same poem, Ephrem again portrays the death of Jesus as a pattern for human good works:

> [*Eccl* 29.13] At that time, my Lord, they crucified you upon wood.
> Today, let everyone crucify himself upon love!
> And in place of the nails, let there be fasts,
> And in place of the thorns, let there be the commandments![83]

Ephrem's reading of Col 2:14 makes human actions—"the commandments" (*pûqdānê*) and other activities such as fasting and repentance—participants in the crucifixion. That participation enables them to "blot out" the bond of debt. Notably, however, Ephrem consistently refrains from describing such actions as capable of "paying for" (*praʿ*) human debt, language which he applies exclusively to the death of Jesus. In Ephrem's conception, baptism appears to provide access to Christ's payment of debt (although Ephrem is far from systematic on this point). After baptism, the "blotting out" of subsequent debt comes as a consequence of repentant action and obedience to God's commandments. For Ephrem, obedience and repentance, concretely represented through actions, were the necessary responses to God's act of paying human debt through the Passion and death of Jesus.[84]

3.4 *Imitation and Reciprocity in Ephrem's Social World*

In the examples cited above, Ephrem urges the Christian faithful to let their daily actions of obedience and love imitate the model of Jesus' crucifixion.

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83 ܠܝ ܚܙܪ, ܘܩܘܗ ܚܠ ܡܝܘܟ ܚܘܘܟ ܪܚܟ \ ܚܠ ܣܘܚܟ ܠܪܘܘܟ ܠܚܡܟ ܠܘܚ \ ܘܣܠܟ ܚܘܩܘܟ ܗܘܡ ܠܘܘܘ ܚܩܚ ܣܩܗ \ ܘܣܠܟ ܚܩܚ ܗܘܡ ܠܩܚ ܩܝܛ (ed. Beck, *Eccl.*, 72).

84 See Harrison, *Paul's Language of Grace*, 184–191. An important counterpoint to this passage is *Comm. Diat.* XXI.17, where Ephrem argues: "Repentance is a crucifixion for sinners, which nails their members secretly, lest they yield to pleasures." (ܗܘܚܚܘܟ ܚܝܚ ܠܣܠܟܚ ܚܩܘܚܘܟ. ܘܩ ܠܘܗ. ܚܚܟ.ܪܚܡܟ ܚܩܚܬܝܘܟ ܚܚܚܝܛ.ܪܚܛ ܚܝܠܚ ܠ ܟ ܪܘܣܝܚܘ ܘܣܝܢܘ *Comm. Diat.* XXI.17; ed. Leloir, *Texte syriaque*, 218; trans. adapted from McCarthy, 325). Notice again the allusion to "nailing" (ܚܟ) in Col 2:14.

This too echoes the social world of patron–client relationships. Ancient clients were not only expected to express their gratitude and loyalty to their patrons in words (through praise and thanksgiving), but also to respond to patrons' beneficence through services rendered.[85] These responses could include imitation. Exhortations to a change of lifestyle (προτρεψις) were a standard feature of Greco-Roman rhetoric, with figures such as gods and heroes often serving as exemplars to be emulated.[86] In his *On Benefaction*, for instance, Seneca urged patrons to mimic the generosity of the gods in their own relationships with their clients.[87] From the earliest Christian writings, Christ was offered as a model to be imitated, especially in his death.[88] At various points, Ephrem also imagined Jesus' suffering and death as an "example," (*taḥwîtâ*) "likeness," (*dmûtâ*), and "mirror" (*maḥzîtâ*) for believers.[89] Jesus' patient response to his persecutors could serve to encourage reconciliation between rival Christian factions.[90] His endurance of suffering could offer a contrast to shame Ephrem's audiences for their improper behavior or provide a moral example when dealing with dishonest or deceptive people.[91]

Ephrem imagines even these reciprocal acts on the part of humans to be ultimately derivative of God's beneficent gifts. As Anderson has shown, Ephrem envisions human responses to God as part of a divine act by which God makes himself indebted to the faithful. He cites *Nat.* 5.12, in which Ephrem alludes to Col 2:14: "He blotted out our bonds and wrote in his name / another bond, that he would be indebted to us."[92] In this image, God has paid down the old bond of indebtedness, issuing at baptism a new bond by which he will borrow the good deeds of the faithful, making *himself* indebted to *them*.[93] This imagery lends further credence to my interpretation of the relationship between Jesus' redemptive Passion and the faithful obedience of believers. If God has become indebted to humans, he has in his favor provided a means

85   DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*, 145.

86   See Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, Library of Early Christianity (Louisville: Westminster, 1987), 92.

87   Seneca, *De ben.* 1.1.9; 4.25.1; 4.26.1; 4.28.1.

88   See John 13:12–15, 15:9–11; Phil 2:3–8; 1John 2:6. Cf. DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*, 147.

89   *Bard.* lxxviii; Syr. 166.

90   *Nis.* 27.12,14.

91   See *On Reproof* I.436–443 and *On Reproof* II.1489–1500.

92   ܘܗܘ ܠܡ ܕܢܣܘܒ ܐܝܟܢܐ \ ܐܝܕܗ ܟܬܒܬ ܘܗܘܬ ܥܝܢ ܠܗ ܕܚܬܡ (ed. Beck, *Nat*, 48). Cf. *Nat.* 3.10, 4.203–205; *Fid.* 5.17.

93   See Anderson, *Sin*, 154. The application of this point goes well beyond almsgiving, which is the focus of Anderson's chapter.

for human deeds to become efficacious and rewarding. The human actions of post-baptismal repentance, fasting, and almsgiving are thus wholly reliant upon divine mercy.

The *madrāšê* I have analyzed so far in this chapter induct their audience into a dramatic narrative, one stretching back to Eden and the Passion, and into which humans become participants through baptism and faithful obedience. These texts are far from systematic, and Ephrem composed them for various contexts and with different rhetorical objectives. Nevertheless, there is a general coherence to their message, as I have demonstrated. The Passion and death of Jesus was a "payment" for the human debt incurred by Adam, *and* God graciously "lends" the faithful the means to "blot out" their own additional debts through repentance and holiness. In this process, they engage in a sort of inward martyrdom, imitating the model provided by Jesus in his Passion and death.

We should understand this entire vision of divine–human interaction through the reciprocal model of social relations that accompanied the practices of patronage and benefaction in late antiquity. The economic imagery of Ephrem's publicly performed poetry presents us with something akin to the *commercium spirituale* ("spiritual exchange") imagined in the poems of Paulinus of Nola in faraway Gaul, only a few decades later. In his insightful analysis of Paulinus, Peter Brown argues that the harmonious reciprocity Paulinus saw between heaven and earth was made possible by the incarnation of Christ, "the foundational act of 'exchange.'"[94] For Ephrem, the death of Christ was likewise a starting point for an ongoing relationship characterized by debt payment and the exchange of gifts.

4 The Debt-Paying Passion in Anti-Marcionite Polemic

Although most of Ephrem's reflections upon the redemptive debt payment of Jesus' Passion and death can be found in publicly performed *madrāšê*, he also engaged with this subject in another venue: sophisticated polemical discourses which responded to the vigorous sectarian debates of fourth-century northern Mesopotamia. The discourses collectively known as the *Prose Refutations* provide our best windows into Ephrem's participation in this debate culture. In these texts, we can observe Ephrem confronting rival ideologies that shared strikingly similar economic metaphors, namely, Marcionite Christians.

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94 Brown, *Through the Eye of A Needle*, 232.

Ephrem and his Marcionite opponents held a common belief that Jesus "paid our debts through his death." Yet here, in the setting where we would expect the most clarity from Ephrem on his theology of the "debt payment" of Christ's death, Ephrem still did not engage the matter in much detail, except to reject the Marcionite interpretation. Ephrem further rejected the Marcionite emphasis on Jesus' death serving as a "ransom." I will argue that Ephrem's engagement with the subject in these prose polemical discourses reveals a certain level of discomfort with the traditional economic imagery he shared with the Marcionites, especially with the metaphor of ransom.

4.1 *The* Prose Refutations *in Context*

The *Prose Refutations* are a collection of prose polemical works which survive in a single palimpsest manuscript from the sixth century.[95] The remarkable survival and recovery of that manuscript has given us a far more extensive knowledge of Ephrem and of the theologies of his opponents. Though the title *Prose Refutations* was a creation of the modern editor, it is an appropriate descriptor for these writings. They are obviously polemical works, aimed at refuting Ephrem's most frequent foes: the followers of Marcion, Mani, and Bardaisan.[96] In addition, they are all non-metrical, prose compositions.[97] Ephrem probably composed these prose polemical works for similar audiences. They are lengthier and their subject matter is more sophisticated (primarily concerned with cosmology and drawing on Stoic philosophy) than we find in most of Ephrem's other writings. As such, it seems reasonable to imagine a more learned, non-liturgical audience for these texts, perhaps the ascetic "literary circle" proposed by Wickes.[98]

Despite their similarities, the *Prose Refutations* address different opponents and have distinct concerns. They exhibit considerable variation in their subject matter. For instance, the five *Discourses to Hypatius* and the *Discourse against Bardaisan's "Domnus"* largely focus their attack upon aspects of Bardaisanite and Manichean cosmology, while the three *Discourses against Marcion* deal

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95 BM Add. 14574 (the first 19 intact folios) / BM Add. 14623 (the palimpsest section). See F.C. Burkitt, "Introductory Essay," in *Prose Refutations* II, cxi.

96 The prose *Mêmrâ on Virginity*, which was published in *Prose Refutations* II, is the single exception to this rule.

97 To avoid confusion, I have opted to continue to refer to these works as *discourses*, even though the manuscript identifies them as *mêmrê*, and Ephrem himself, in the *First Discourse to Hypatius*, describes that work as a "letter" (ܐܓܪܬܐ). However, it was commonplace in antiquity to frame an intellectual discourse as a letter. For examples of this in Syriac, see Ephrem's *Letter to Publius* and the *Letter of Mara to Serapion*.

98 Wickes, "Between Liturgy and School," 45.

primarily with the Marcionite rejection of the Creator God and identification of Jesus as the Son of the "Stranger." Because Ephrem's critique of Marcionism focuses on rebutting Marcionite interpretations of the Old and New Testament, his approach in these texts is much more exegetical than in his polemic against Bardaisanism and Manichaeism.

Ephrem employs the same basic rhetorical strategy in all of these writings: he centers on particular points of "heretical" belief and attempts to demonstrate their incoherence or absurdity. In all of these cases, the *Prose Refutations* echo the other (metrical) anti-heretical writings of Ephrem, like the *Hymns against Heresies* and *Hymns on Faith*. Unlike those writings, however, the *Prose Refutations* develop their themes at greater length, unencumbered by metrical considerations. They engage at length with opposing ideas and even cite and respond to otherwise unknown textual sources.

4.2 *The Marcionite Vision of the Redemptive Passion according to Ephrem*

In his *Third Discourse against Marcion*, Ephrem attacks the Marcionite account of redemption, targeting (among other things) their understanding of Jesus' death.[99] We should understand Ephrem's frequent polemics as evidence of the enduring strength of Marcionite Christianity in Syria and Mesopotamia. Decades later, in the early fifth century, Theodoret and Rabbula both attest to struggles against "Marcionite" communities in the Syrian countryside. Although their own sources are now lost, Marcionites at the time represented a dynamic Christian tradition in the region. Unfortunately, we are forced to parse the details of their theology and practice from the polemical attacks of opponents like Ephrem. As we might expect, Ephrem's anti-Marcionite polemic persistently accentuates the differences between "us" and "them," rather than the similarities.[100] David Bundy sees this as evidence of contemporary Marcionite attempts at "assimilating to 'orthodoxy'" which Ephrem then sought to counter.[101]

The Marcionite account of redemption appears to have drawn heavily upon economic metaphors to describe the transaction conducted between the disguised Stranger (Jesus) and the Creator, for the souls enslaved in the material

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99   See Drijvers, "Christ as Warrior and Merchant," 82–85. For more on the rhetoric and argumentation of these texts, see Lieu, *Marcion*, 154.

100 Among which were many common practices, like prayer, asceticism, fasting, the eucharist, and a self-identification as the "church." See Lieu, *Marcion*, 158–159.

101 Bundy, "Marcion and the Marcionites," 31.

world.[102] I say "appears to" because we only see Marcionite positions filtered through the lenses of their opponents, such as Ephrem. As such, it is impossible to know the "real" Marcion and the Marcionites, as Judith Lieu has argued. I recognize, therefore, that the perspective on Marcionite theology that I am offering here is imperfect. Still, in this matter, we are dealing with a facet of Marcionite thought that is independently attested by several ancient Christian polemicists, suggesting that the general picture is fairly reliable.

Ephrem's polemic gives insight into the broader context in which Ephrem drew upon the Bible to portray Jesus' death as a payment of debt. It also offers a subtle contrast between Ephrem's understanding of the Passion as an unspecified *"payment"* and the Marcionite conception of the Passion as a *"ransom"* paid by the Stranger to the Creator. For quite some time, scholars have argued that Marcionite Christians played a major role in developing the ransom motif from its biblical antecedents.[103] While Ephrem and his Marcionite opponents apparently drew upon common biblically-rooted economic imagery to portray the events of the Passion narrative, they applied that imagery in different ways and for different ends.

In the first two *Discourses Against Marcion*, Ephrem targets the Marcionite interpretations of Jesus' baptism and transfiguration.[104] The centrality of these two accounts in Ephrem's anti-Marcionite polemic leads Han Drijvers to argue that the two narratives played a crucial role in the Marcionite Gospel story.[105] An important commonality between the two is that both describe the appearance of a heavenly voice recognizing Jesus as "Son," which in the Marcionite interpretation, revealed Jesus' true identity as Son of the Stranger. The Marcionites further seem to have portrayed the Transfiguration as a sort of negotiation for human souls between Jesus (representing the Stranger), and Moses and Elijah (the representatives of the Creator).[106] In this scene, Jesus first appeared merely as a merchant to make a deal, but then surprised the Creator's representatives by manifesting his splendor as a divine warrior.[107]

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102   I say "appears to" because we only see Marcion's positions filtered through the lenses of his opponents, such as Ephrem. As such, it is impossible to know the "real" Marcion, as Judith Lieu has argued (*Marcion*, 9).

103   See the examples cited by TeSelle, "The Cross as Ransom," 157–158.

104   For further critique of the Marcionite reading of the Transfiguration in Ephrem's writings, see also *Comm. Diat.* 14.9 and *CH* 48.8–10. For a similar anti-Marcionite critique, see Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 4.22 (though Tertullian does not mention any transaction between the Creator and Stranger at the Transfiguration, as Ephrem does).

105   Drijvers, "Christ as Warrior and Merchant," 76–77. See also Lieu, *Marcion*, 230–231.

106   See Drijvers, "Christ as Warrior and Merchant," 81; Lieu, *Marcion*, 382–383.

107   Drijvers, "Christ as Warrior and Merchant," 83–85. Ephrem attempts to exploit the Mar-

Ephrem uses the *Third Discourse Against Marcion* to question some of the broader assumptions and metaphors of the Marcionite redemptive narrative—particularly their understanding of *ransom* and *debt payment*. At the beginning of the section in question, Ephrem challenges the ability of the "Good God" (another term for the "Stranger") to pardon humans for transgressing the law of another (i.e. the Creator).[108] In Ephrem's understanding, such an action could be neither just nor good, because humanity is not the possession of the Stranger.[109] He then anticipates a Marcionite objection, that Jesus "paid our debt by his death" (*praʿh lam l-ḥawbtan b-mawteh*).[110] This affirmation, of course, is nearly identical to similar statements made by Ephrem, as seen in the first part of this chapter. For Ephrem's imagined Marcionite interlocutor, the force of this counterpoint would be to demonstrate the fairness of the transaction between the Stranger and the Creator. Because the price had been paid, the Marcionite would say, it was just and right for the Stranger to provide forgiveness of human debt. Yet Ephrem is critical of the Marcionite affirmation of this shared conviction:

> Since we owed a real debt, therefore, if he died in reality, he also paid our debt in reality; but if he died [only] in appearance, our debt also was paid by a fraud.[111]

Ephrem thus critiques the Marcionite confession of debt payment by attacking the Marcionite teaching that Jesus only *appeared* to die, which he elsewhere describes as a "likeness" (*damyâ*) rather than a "reality" (*šrārâ*).[112] Ephrem thus portrays these two aspects of the Marcionite confession as incompatible: *either* Jesus paid the debt through a real death, *or*, if he only appeared to die, there was no legitimate payment because the payment was a "fraud" (*zêpâ*).[113]

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cionite juxtaposition of the metaphors of purchase and forceful power by arguing that a person who "purchases" something with compulsion is not engaged in a fair purchase, but a violent seizure of property (*Marc. III*, ed. 132–133).

108   Unfortunately, several lines before this are illegible in the manuscript, so we cannot be sure of the beginning of this line of argumentation.

109   *Marc. III*, ed. 131–132.

110   *Marc. III*, ed. 131.

111   ܪܣܠ ܣܘܚܬܐ ܗܘ ܐܬܘܕܐ ܪܙܚܐ. ܐܪܠܘ ܗܘܡ ܣܚܝ ܐܪܙܟܐ ܟܣܬ ܘܡܐܘ ܐܠܟ ܐܪܙܟ ܪܟܬ ܟܘܗܕܟ ܐܪܙܟ ܪܙܟ ܗܘܟܐ (*Marc. III*, ed. 131).

112   "If you say that Jesus was actually crucified, you say that it was a likeness (ܪܡܝܐ) and not a reality (ܫܪܝܪܐ). And if you add that he also descended to Sheol and ascended, you say it, though to you, it is not true, for you do not confess the [resurrection of] the body." (*Marc. I*, ed. 81; trans. xxxvii). See also *CH* 33.7, 36.12, 47.1; Eznik of Kolb, *On God*, 386.

113   *Marc. III*, ed. 131.

By questioning the payment offered by Jesus' death, Ephrem struck also at the imagery of "purchase/ransom" (root *zban*), that was common among Marcionite Christians. The "ransom" seems to have occurred as the result of a payment offered by the Stranger for human souls belonging to the Creator. As Drijvers reconstructs it (on the basis of Ephrem's anti-Marcionite works), Marcionite teaching saw the Transfiguration as a vital moment for this transaction, in which the representatives of the Creator (Elijah and Moses) and the Stranger (Jesus) sealed the agreement that Jesus would purchase human souls through his death on the cross.[114] In the *First Discourse against Marcion*, Ephrem strongly questions this interpretation of the Transfiguration, calling it "Marcion's perverse tale" (*šarbeh asisâ d-Marqion*).[115] Indeed, he finds the very notion of a ransom paid to redeem human souls deeply problematic: "Explain to us then: what is the ransom (*zabnā*) that the Stranger paid? From whom did he ransom (*zban*) it? With what did he ransom (*zban*) it?"[116] He further criticizes the Marcionite account of this purchase as a "robbery," since it involved the theft of humans who were, according to Marcionite theology, the Creator's property.[117]

Ephrem finds the Marcionite application of language of "ransom" or "purchase" to have problematic connotations because it creates an opposition between Jesus and the Creator, which he sees as unjustifiable. "They have heard only the word 'ransom' (*zbinutâ*)," he writes in the *Third Discourse Against Marcion*, "and from it have named 'strangeness' (*nûkrāyûtâ*)."[118] As Judith Lieu notes, this passage indicates that Ephrem was aware of the common biblical language he shared with the Marcionites, though he does not engage with that shared imagery in any depth beyond mocking the Marcionites and characterizing their idea of ransom as theft or slavery.[119] Ephrem views the Marcionite understanding of the biblical ransom motif as the ultimate source of their dualistic opposition between the Creator and the Stranger. It thus seems no coincidence that Ephrem generally avoids using the root *zbn* (despite its biblical pedigree) to describe Christ's redemption in favor of "pay" (root *prʿ*).[120] I have

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114   See Lieu, *Marcion*, Drijvers, "Christ as Warrior and Merchant," 81.

115   *Marc. I*, ed. 91.

116   ܚܥܡ ܠܡ ܚܒܠ ܡܢܗ ܘܠܟ ܙܘܢܝ ܢܘܟܪܝܐ ܘܡܢ ܡܢܗ ܘܠܡܐ ܘܒܡܢܐ ܗܘܐ ܙܒܢܗ (*Marc. I*, ed. 96; trans. adapted from xliv).

117   *Marc. III*, ed. 138.

118   ܘܢܘܟܪܝܘܬܐ ܫܡܗܘ ܘܡܢܗ ܙܒܝܢܘܬܐ ܕܘܠܣܘܕ ܫܡܥܘ ܒܠܚܘܕ (*Marc. III*, ed. 135; trans. lxi).

119   Lieu, *Marcion*, 173.

120   Gal 2:13: "But the Messiah has ransomed us from the curse of the law" (ܠܢ ܕܝܢ ܦܪܩܢ
       ܢܡܘܣܐ ܕܠܘܛܬܐ ܡܢ ܦܪܩܢ); Gal 4:5: "that he might ransom them that were under the law; and that we might receive the adoption of sons." (ܕܐܝܠܝܢ ܕܒܢܡܘܣܐ ܐܢܘܢ ܢܦܪܘܩ

found only a handful of such examples of that root and its variants in Ephrem's writings.[121] This linguistic choice points to Ephrem's attempt to avoid the sort of language that the Marcionites used to describe the Stranger's redemption of human souls from the power of the Creator.

Ephrem's effort to distance his own teaching from that of the Marcionites is instructive for our understanding of his portrayal of the redemptive effects of Jesus' death. While Ephrem and his Marcionite opponents both professed that Christ "paid our debts through his death," the Marcionites saw that debt payment as a transaction by which one divine power ransomed human souls from the control of another. Against this landscape of competing Christian sects in Northern Mesopotamia, we can better understand Ephrem's lack of clarification on the nature of human debt and its payment. The affirmation was traditional, and could not be rejected. Yet even in the "scholastic" venue of anti-heretical polemic, when provided with the opportunity to develop his views at length, Ephrem declined to elaborate further on his theological understanding of the debt and how Jesus' death paid it. He acknowledged the *reality* of the debt, and that it was paid, but quickly pivoted to challenge the Marcionite denial of Jesus' real human body.

Rather than conceive of the debt-paying death of Jesus as a "ransom" of human souls from the Creator, Ephrem imagined the debt as a matter between God and humans, his created beings. Although in his *madrāšê*, Ephrem portrayed human debt as originating with the sin of Adam, placing humanity under the power of death and sin, he did not develop any concept of a "ransom" paid to these powers. Jesus simply forced an end to humanity's bondage to Death.[122] Likewise, in *Nis.* 35, one of the descent to Sheol dialogue poems, Death's boasting over the dead Jesus ends with the revelation of Jesus' power, which overthrows the gates of Sheol, and releases the dead from their tombs.[123]

ܥܒ̈ܕܐ (ܗܠܝܢ ܠܡܘܬ ܘܦܪܩܗ); 1 Cor 6:20: "For you are ransomed with a price" (ܐܙܕܒܢܬܘܢ ܐܟܒܕܢ ܒܕܡܝܐ ܓܝܪ); cf. 1 Cor 7:23. Interestingly, the OS and Peshitta of Matt 20:28 and Mark 10:45 have ܦܘܪܩܢܐ ("salvation") rather than "ransom," as in the Greek.

121   See *Virg.* 7.12: "Oil became a slave for purchasing (ܠܡܙܒܢ) the freedom of the noble. / The Messiah became a slave for purchasing (ܠܡܙܒܢ) the freedom of the slaves of sin." See also *Repr.* 3.345: "Who will despise the flock / purchased (ܕܙܒܝܢ) with the blood of God (ܒܕܡܗ ܕܐܠܗܐ)?" (ed. Beck, *Sermones I*, 55). In the context of *Repr.* 3, Ephrem has spent the entire homily condemning the rich and using economic language to argue that human "debts" are being tallied by justice. Just prior to this stanza (3.311–314), he encourages his audience to become sheep (only liable for themselves) rather than herdsmen (responsible for many).

122   See *Nis.* 48.9 and the discussion of that text earlier in this chapter.

123   *Nis.* 35.11.

The scene depicted in this dramatic poem (and its corollary, *Nis*. 41) is not one of a hostage negotiation between two parties; Jesus does not pay Death or Satan anything. Rather, he overwhelmed them with his power, breaking down the gates of Sheol with the sound of his voice.[124]

Ephrem's discomfort with the ransom motif was shared by other proto-orthodox and Nicene Christian writers. Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, raises the issue in one of his orations and strongly criticizes the idea that Christ would pay a "ransom" (λύτρον) to the devil, calling it an "outrage" (ὕβρεως). With some nuance, Gregory instead suggests that the Father is the only reasonable object of a ransom paid by Christ's death.[125] Ephrem's conflict with Marcionism, particularly on the "ransom" idea, seems to have colored his engagement with the topic of redemptive debt payment in other contexts. He was generally unwilling to use language and imagery of ransom or negotiation, as this might have evoked the theology of the Marcionite foes whom he frequently sought to undermine and discredit. We could, indeed, read Ephrem's "economics" of redemption as a conscious reconfiguring of the Marcionite version. Instead of a negotiation with the devil or death, as we have seen, Ephrem imagined a divine conquest of death, resulting in a prison break from Sheol and a forced invalidation of the "bond of indebtedness" that had left Adam's descendants subject to death. While Ephrem maintained the traditional language and imagery of debt payment, he framed it in terms of the patron–client relationship between God and humanity. His language situated the transaction within the realm of the benefactions offered by a king to his people or a patron to his clients.

5   Conclusion

This chapter has explored Ephrem's use of debt payment imagery to imagine the signficance of the death of Jesus. Through this example, I have shown that Ephrem imagined the death of Jesus and its consequences in a manner that was grounded in metaphors appropriate to his social environment—particularly economic imagery tied to the relational economy of patronage and benefaction common in fourth-century Syria and Mesopotamia. By unraveling the working of that imagery, we can better understand the often-obscure context in which

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124   Cf. *Nis*. 35.11; 41.16.

125   *Or*. 45.22 (PG 36.653). Origen, in his *Commentary on Matthew*, adopts the opposite view, arguing that the ransom could not have been paid to the Father, and that the devil is the only reasonable option. See Lombardo, *The Father's Will*, 186–189.

Ephrem lived and wrote. I further argued that situating Ephrem's portrayal of the death of Jesus in light of these social bonds helps us to understand his dual affirmations that the suffering and death of Jesus "paid our debt," while the actions of the faithful were themselves also redemptive.

Throughout this chapter, I again emphasized the fundamental importance of interpreting Ephrem's ideas within the distinct literary and performative contexts in which they took shape. This chapter thus separately examined two distinct venues in which Ephrem engaged with the suffering and death of Jesus as a payment of human debt: the liturgical or para-liturgical *madrāšê*, and the prose polemical discourses known as the *Prose Refutations*. Between these two venues, I observed some notable differences in how Ephrem engaged with the idea of redemptive debt payment. Despite the discrete goals and approaches evident in these two literary genres and settings, Ephrem was nonetheless relatively consistent: he did not explore the redemptive debt payment of the suffering and death of Jesus in systematic detail. In fact, Ephrem's polemical encounter with the Marcionites reveals significant ambivalence regarding certain aspects of debt payment imagery. Some of this language was a legacy of Christian tradition that Ephrem could not easily abandon, so he affirmed that the death of Jesus paid human debt, while maintaining human responsibility for obedience and repentance as likewise redemptive. Yet Ephrem did not hesitate to abandon the traditional language of "ransom" and reframe his debt payment imagery around the beneficent actions of God, the creator and gracious patron of humankind.

Time, Chronology, and the Crucifixion

1   Introduction

Ephrem's community in Nisibis, like other Christian groups since perhaps the late first century, ritually commemorated the death of Jesus during a particular time and season—the holiday of Pascha. In Ephrem's lifetime, the celebration of this festival probably underwent a significant transformation, with the feast becoming longer and shifting to a different date. Ephrem's *madrāšê* for the feast, however, reveal only hints of these changes; instead, his focus was primarily on creating a coherent temporal tapestry—showing how the timing of the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus was embedded in creation, scripture, and the calendar, and how it was reenacted in the festival of the church. To weave this tapestry, Ephrem drew upon his knowledge of astronomy and time-keeping, utilized Greco-Roman poetic models and employed familiar ancient rhetorical devices like personification.

Much of previous scholarship has attempted to use data points from Ephrem's writings to reconstruct the Paschal celebrations of the churches of Nisibis and Edessa or to consider the lingering influence of the "Quartodeciman" date of Easter. While those questions are important (and I will address them), they are not the primary concern of this chapter. Indeed, engaging in polemic about the timing and practices of the Paschal feast, or on the date and time of Jesus' death, was apparently not of much interest to Ephrem either, as we will see. Rather, my focus in this chapter, in keeping with the emphasis of this book, is on how Ephrem imagined the death of Jesus—in this case, *when* it took place and what that meant. That being said, we should not separate Ephrem's interest in the timing and chronology of Jesus' death from the social world in which he lived and wrote. It is inevitable that Ephrem's writings would reflect concerns springing from his own context. Therefore, this chapter will also consider how the topic of time both reflects and sheds light on the context and performance of these festal *madrāšê*.

In the course of this analysis, I will first address the question of when Ephrem and his community celebrated Pascha, and consider how that celebration might have shaped his thinking about Jesus' death. Next, I will examine how Ephrem personified April and utilized traditional spring imagery in order to create striking connections between the death of Jesus, the annual arrival of spring, and the celebration of the Paschal feast. Ephrem transformed

the (rather dry) topic of when Jesus died into something fundamentally dramatic. He likewise wove together various moments in the life and death of Jesus and other events in biblical history through chronological parallelism. He drew upon early Christian chronographic speculations and used them to construct a universal chronology, in which other biblical narratives culminate in the account of the Passion and death of Jesus. The final sections of the chapter will focus on a single *madrāšâ* (*Cruc.* 6) in which Ephrem worked through the chronology of the Passion narrative and attempted to reconcile it with the "three days and three nights" of Matt 12:40. In my analysis of this unique source, I will shed light on Ephrem's participation in a broader exegetical conversation about Paschal chronology, and show how he drew that earlier exegetical tradition about Jesus' death into a broader universal chronology, attested to by the calendar and the heavenly bodies.

2   The Feast of Pascha in Northern Mesopotamia

My first priority in this chapter is to address a subject that has been of great interest to scholars: the paschal feast in Syria and northern Mesopotamia. Determining the character of Pascha as it was celebrated in Nisibis and Edessa in the mid-fourth-century is a challenging task. When exactly did Ephrem's community celebrate the festival? What was the liturgical format of that festival? These questions are difficult to resolve, since Ephrem only offers bits and pieces of evidence with which we might seek to answer them.

2.1   *Ephrem and the Quartodeciman Pascha*
Gerard Rouwhorst has provided the most comprehensive and well-reasoned solutions to these questions by drawing on sources roughly contemporaneous with Ephrem—one of the Syriac recensions of the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and the twelfth *Demonstration* of Aphrahat.[1] Rouwhorst argues that Ephrem's community (along with the other churches east of Antioch) was originally "Quartodeciman," celebrating Pascha concurrent with the Jewish Passover, on the night of the 14th–15th of the month of Nisan. Following the ruling of the Council of Nicaea (325) against this practice, these churches then adopted the new practice of celebrating Pascha on the Sunday immediately following the first

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1   Rouwhorst's work has been well-received among liturgical historians. See, for example Paul
    F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity*, Alcuin Club Collections 86 (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2011), 54.

full moon after the spring equinox.[2] From my perspective, there is no reason to doubt this conclusion. There is strong evidence to support the claim that Quartodeciman practice was once standard among Christians in the region.[3] It is also very clear from later sources that the churches of Syria and Mesopotamia eventually shifted to the new style of paschal celebration.

There is still the question, though, of how quickly after the ruling of the Council of Nicaea the churches of Nisibis and Edessa ceased following the Quartodeciman practice. How long did the old practice endure in Ephrem's community? Moreover, what exactly did the Nicene canon on Easter say (the text has not survived), and how was it received, given the contested Christological legacy of the council throughout much of the fourth century?[4] Given that there were clearly holdhouts against the council's ruling, and that liturgical traditions are not easily changed, I am not certain we can assume that the new paschal celebration had fully taken root by the time Ephrem composed his *madrāšê*.[5]

Christine Shepardson draws upon Rouwhorst's conclusions as evidence to support her larger contention that Ephrem's anti-Jewish polemic was an attempt to shape Christian behavior and belief into conforming with Nicene Christianity. She thus understands Ephrem's rhetoric against Christian "Judaizing" through participation in the Passover as an effort to promote the Council of Nicaea's decree against celebrating Pascha on 14 Nisan.[6] While I would not dispute that Ephrem is trying to shape Christian identity over and against a Jewish "other," the portrait of Ephrem as a fierce pro-Nicene partisan is unsupported

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2 Rouwhorst, *Hymnes pascales*, Vol. 1, 191–192.

3 The consensus view among scholars today is that the Quartodeciman Pascha preceded the celebration of Pascha on Sunday, not only in Mesopotamia, but around the Mediterranean. See Bradshaw and Johnson, *Origins*, 39–40.

4 The canon of Nicaea against the celebration of Pascha on 14 Nisan is referenced (albeit vaguely) in the first canon of the Council of Antioch of 341, in a citation of an edict of Constantine reproduced by Eusebius of Caesarea (Eusebius, *Vita Constantinii* 3.17–20), and in the purported synodal letter of Nicaea preserved by Socrates (*HE* 1.6) and Theodoret (*HE* 1.9).

5 It is clear that there was resistance. Aphrahat's Quartodeciman opponents in *Dem.* 12 are an important indication of this. Rouwhorst argues that these opponents were simply conservative members of the "Great Church" who opposed changes to traditional liturgical practice (*Hymnes pascales*, Vol. 1, 191). Later in the fourth century, Epiphanius of Salamis mentions the "Audians," a group originating in Mesopotamia who rejected the Council of Nicaea's decree and continued celebrating Pascha in the Quartodeciman fashion (*Panarion* 70.9.1–4). Despite his critiques of this practice and their anthropomorphic view of God, Epiphanius admires their ascetic discipline and sees them as mostly orthodox (*Panarion* 70.14.6). How long did it take for a distinct group to crystalize (if Epiphanius' account is to be trusted)?

6 Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy*, 30–31.

by his writings, which make no mention of the Council of Nicaea (outside of one, characteristically vague reference to a "synod" in *CH* 22.20). More specifically, as I will show in this chapter, Ephrem does not engage in outright polemic on the issue of the date of Pascha. Instead, the exact nature of his position on this issue is somewhat uncertain.

It seems best, therefore, to adopt an agnostic position regarding when exactly Ephrem's church in Nisibis shifted away from a Quartodeciman Paschal celebration. At the very least, we can certainly say that traditions of the Quartodeciman celebration could have shaped Ephrem's imagination. Assuming he was born sometime around the usually accepted date (ca. 307), and assuming that the Christians of Nisibis shifted their celebration away from the Quartodeciman date sometime after 325, Ephrem's experience of Pascha in the formative years of his early life must have been the Quartodeciman feast. If we look to early surviving Paschal texts of possible Quartodeciman origin—namely, Melito of Sardis's *Peri Pascha* (ca. 165) and the anonymous Greek homily *In Sanctum Pascha* (a difficult text to date with any certainty)—we find close parallels with Ephrem.[7] These similarities include a singular emphasis on the death of Jesus (not the resurrection) and the development of a detailed typology linking the commandments in Exodus 12 regarding the Passover lamb with the account of the death of Jesus.[8] Further, we should understand Ephrem's overriding concern with the month of Nisan (which he associates not only with the Passover and crucifixion, but even with the creation and fall of Adam), as an inheritance of those earlier traditions in which the feast was celebrated on the 14th/15th of that month, following the Jewish practice. In all these ways, the Quartodeciman background of Ephrem and his community shaped how the poet imagined the time and commemoration of Jesus' death.

2.2   *Sources: Identifying Ephrem's "Paschal Hymns"*

Before proceeding further, we should pause and consider the sources for this subject. To our knowledge, Ephrem did not write any systematic treatises or even homilies on the Christian Pascha. For insights into Ephrem's understanding of Pascha and the manner in which his community celebrated the feast, scholars have looked to a group of *madrāšê* commonly identified as the "Paschal hymns." Three particular *madrāšê* cycles (*On the Unleavened Bread, On the Crucifixion*, and *On the Resurrection*) typically share this label. Both the common designation "Pachal hymns" and the individual titles of the three

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7   For the critical edition of the latter, see Pierre Nautin, *Homélies paschales I*, SC 27 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1950).

8   See Bradshaw and Johnson, *Origins*, 44–45.

cycles can be deceiving—as if these contain *all* of Ephrem's "Paschal" *madrāšê*, and as if the contents of each cycle corresponds to its title.[9] In fact, neither is the case. These cycles as we know them likely did not originate with Ephrem himself, but instead reflect a later editorial attempt to arrange certain "Paschal" *madrāšê* of Ephrem into collections corresponding with the developing liturgical practices for Holy Week, as Jean Gribomont suggests.[10] Further, while the "Paschal hymns" survive in two manuscripts (B.L. Add. 14,627 and B.L. Add. 14,571), these codices transmit only two *madrāšê* in common.[11] In Rouwhorst's assessment, this suggests that the two manuscripts each drew on some larger collection of *madrāšê* for Pascha. Indeed, as he notes, the Sinai *Index* of melodies of Ephrem's *madrāšê* (Ms. Sin. Syr. 10) attests to such a collection (including 67 total *madrāšê*).[12] The surviving "Paschal hymns" are thus only a fraction of the Paschal *madrāšê* attributed to Ephrem that circulated in late antiquity.

As a final point, the *madrāšê* preserved in the three Paschal cycles do not even appear to comprise all of the surviving poems of Ephrem that were composed for liturgical or para-liturgical celebration in the paschal season. For this reason, I think it wise to broaden the category of "Paschal hymns" to consider together all of Ephrem's *madrāšê* written for the paschal season. This expanded group could include up to fifteen additional poems contained in various cycles.[13] My first criterion for inclusion in this category is that a poem

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9   Although the manuscript tradition divides them into distinct hymn cycles, the contents of the *Hymns on the Unleavened Bread, Hymns on the Crucifixion*, and *Hymns on the Resurrection* overlap in certain respects. In this sense, the titles of the three hymn cycles are somewhat misleading. For example, the nine *madrāšê* surviving under the heading *On the Crucifixion* are not all about the crucifixion. Several in particular are more resonant with themes found in many of the *madrāšê* in the cycle *On the Unleavened Bread* (e.g., *Cruc.* 2 and 3). See Hartung et al., trans., *Songs for the Fast and Pascha*, 12.

10   As Gribomont argues, the internal content of the cycles themselves does not reflect the sort of chronological progression through the events of the end of Jesus' life, his death, and resurrection which their titles would seem to suggest. Rather, they share common motifs and thematic elements (e.g., references to the Exodus and Passion narratives and festal and springtime imagery). (Jean Gribomont, "Le triomphe de Pâques," 149).

11   Rouwhorst, *Les hymnes pascales*, 30.

12   Rouwhorst, *Les hymnes pascales*, Vol. 1, 30.

13   The most obvious liturgical poem for Pascha outside of the three "Paschal" cycles is *Eccl.* 51, which explicitly deals with the paschal feast and the month of Nisan. *Ieiun.* 5, with its extended references to Passover and to the death of Jesus, likely also belongs in this category. This category could also include *Nis.* 35–42, dramatic dialogue and monologue poems spoken in the voices of Death and the Evil One, reflecting on the death and resurrection of Jesus. Other, less certain possibilities include *Virg.* 20 and 21 (which focus on the city of Ephraim, mentioned in John 11:54 as the place where Jesus stayed prior to coming

must show clear signs of composition for performance in or around Pascha (including references to the feast or the festal month of April). Explicit parallels between the Christian feast of Pascha and its fulfillment of the Jewish feast of Passover (also named *pasḥâ*) should particularly draw our attention.[14] Second, such poems should also make references or allusions to biblical passages linked to the feast, especially the gospel Passion narrative and the Exodus narrative.[15]

These hints of performative context, while usually still quite opaque, help to set these poems apart from most of the rest of Ephrem's corpus.[16] However, while we can identify this larger group as "Paschal hymns," each poem should stand on its own. They do not all share the same meter and melody, nor were they likely composed to be read in a series.[17] Nor, indeed, were they likely performed in the same kinds of settings—some were likely performed in the church, in the course of the paschal vigil. Others may have been sung in public processions or in small gatherings for communal meals or study.[18] This expanded category of Paschal *madrāšê* make up the majority of the source material we will consider in this chapter.

3 Marking Time and Retelling the Passion Narrative

3.1 *April Personified:* Res. *3 and* Res. *4*
For Ephrem, the Paschal feast was synonymous with the month of Nisan (April). In this section, I will focus on how Ephrem imagined April as the paschal month, giving particular attention to two of his *madrāšê*—*On the Resurrection* 3 and 4. Utilizing the rhetorical device of personification, Ephrem

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to Jerusalem for his final Passover), *Fid.* 87 (which portrays subordinationist Christians as enacting a "second Passion"), and potentially the sequence of *Eccl.* 38–42 (especially 39, which focuses on Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem).

14 The clear linguistic connection between the names of the two feast days is lost in English translation (though preserved in many other modern languages), but it shaped Christian teaching from a very early date.

15 I am drawing on criteria articulated by Wickes, "Between Liturgy and School," 37.

16 On the hints of the performance of the "Paschal hymn" cycles, see Hartung, trans., *Songs for Lent and Pascha*, 17–19.

17 In a recent article, I argued that the sixth-century cycles of Ephrem's *madrāšê* represent (sometimes loosely) thematic compilations by editors, not cohesive volumes composed at a single point in time. I contend that examining the smaller metrical sub-units that share a common meter and melody ("meter-melodies") offers a more productive approach to considering questions of authenticity and dating in regard to the hymns of Ephrem. See Hartung, "The Authorship and Dating," 318–320.

18 See Rouwhorst, "Original Setting," 220–222.

transformed the month into a participant in the narrative of the death of Jesus and an active agent in the continued patterns of springtime that, in his imagination, accompanied the Paschal feast. In doing so, Ephrem adapted traditional literary patterns and tropes to a radically new purpose.

As I observed above, Ephrem's emphasis on Nisan must have ultimately derived from the Quartodeciman practice of celebrating Pascha concurrently with the Jewish Passover celebration on the night of the 14th–15th of Nisan. By speaking of Nisan in his *madrāšê*, though, Ephrem could evoke this traditional setting of the feast while avoiding any specific reference to the particular day it was celebrated. Ephrem's repeated focus on this month is also apparently quite new; this is not a theme that appears in the surviving Quartodeciman sources.

Ephrem's Nisan was also not identical to the Nisan of the Jewish lunar calendar. In the 365-day solar calendar used by Ephrem (known to scholars as the Syro-Antiochene calendar), the earlier month name Nisan was employed as the name of the solar month we call April.[19] It is noteworthy, therefore, that if Ephrem's community was following the Nicene decree on the celebration of Pascha, the feast could fall as early as late March. This would mean that Ephrem opted to highlight the month of April despite the fact that it was not always the month in which Pascha was celebrated.

Res. 3 is an excellent example of the way in which Ephrem transformed the month of April into a dramatic participant in biblical events and his own time.[20] In this poem, April appears as a masculine personification, a counterpoint to the character of "Daughter Zion." Ephrem and his audience were likely quite familiar with the notion of personifying months and seasons. Personifications of the four seasons are well known from the visual culture of the region; mosaic depictions of these figures have been identified at a number of fourth- through sixth-century sites throughout the Levant.[21] In constructing a literary personification of April, Ephrem drew upon a longstanding Aramaic literary trope of personifying the months. Several surviving Jewish and Chris-

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19   This is an important distinction between Ephrem's Nisan and the Nisan of the lunar Jewish calendar, and is the reason why I have opted for translating Nisan as "April" here. For the Syro-Antiochene calendar, see Sacha Stern, *Calendars in Antiquity: Empires, States, and Societies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 255–257.

20   I also examined this *madrāšâ* in Chapter 4.

21   Some of the mosaic inscriptions associated with these images (from Antioch, Petra, and Beirut, among other locations) are listed at Angelos Chaniotis, Thomas Corsten, Nikolaos Papazarkadas, and Rolf A. Tybout, eds., "SEG 61–1633. Personifications. The Four Seasons in the mosaics of the Eastern Roman Empire", in *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*. Consulted online on November 6, 2021 at http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/10.1163/1874-6772_seg_a61_1633.

tian sources from Syria, Mesopotamia, and Palestine in late antiquity allude to a "dispute of the months."[22] Indeed, *Res.* 3 seems to reflect a conscious appropriation of this dispute format—in the first and fourteenth stanzas, he describes April as "the victorious month" (*yarḥâ zakyâ*), implying its superiority over all its rivals. The roots of this trope are very deep—a surviving Sumerian precedence dispute between Winter and Summer speaks to the long history of these kinds of personifications in the Near East.

The initial stanzas of *Res.* 3 (1, 4, 6) highlight April's role in the Exodus and in the events surrounding Jesus' Passion. It was April who delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and led the assembled crowds to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem for his triumphal entry. April also "stripped away" the "adornments" of "Daughter Zion"—her temple veil and her festivals, especially the "greatest feast" of the year: Passover.[23] In turn, April then gave the festival to the church. In stanza 7, Ephrem imagines April as an attendant serving the church (whom he depicts as the king's bride), garlanding the royal woman with flowers.[24] The message is clear: the great month has acted in history and continues to act now on behalf of the church.

Later in the poem, Ephrem leaves behind personification and seeks to further demonstrate how April's actions echo and rehearse the gospel Passion narrative, as we can see in stanza 8:

> [*Res.* 3.8] In April, flowers tear their calyxes and their roses come forth,
> leaving them bare, and they become garlands for others.
> Like April is April's feast, in which the high priest tore his garments,
> and priesthood fled from him, leaving him naked,
> and it was exposed before our Savior. Blessed is the just one who
>   claimed what is his![25]

Here, Ephrem demonstrates his striking ability to bring together apparently unrelated biblical passages on the basis of common vocabulary. In the Syriac

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22   See Sebastian P. Brock, "A Dispute of the Months and Some Related Syriac Texts," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 30, no. 2 (1985): 181–211; Michael Rand, "An Aramaic Dispute Between the Months by Sahlan ben Avraham," *Melilah: Manchester Journal of Jewish Studies* 9 (2012): 101–113.

23   *Res.* 3.6 (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 86).

24   *Res.* 3.7.

25   ܢܦܩܘ ܡܢ ܚܘܒܫܗܘܢ ܦܩܥܘ ܘܢܦܩܘ ܘܘܪܕܝܗܘܢ ܀ ܫܒܩܘ ܠܗܘܢ ܓܠܝܐ ܕܐܬܟܠܝܠ ܗܘܘܝ ܡܠܟܐ ܠܐܣܛܠܐ ܀ ܐܝܟ ܢܝܣܢ ܥܐܕܗ ܕܢܝܣܢ ܒܗ ܐܝܟ ܚܒܪܘܗܝ, ܨܪܝ ܚܣܝܐ ܠܐܣܛܠܗ ܘܗܘܐ ܟܗܢܘܬܐ ܥܪܩܬ ܡܢܗ ܘܫܒܩܬܗ ܠܗ ܓܠܝܐ ܀ ܘܐܬܟܠܝ ܩܕܡ ܗܘ ܦܪܘܩܢ ܒܪܝܟ ܟܐܢܐ ܕܬܒܥ ܕܝܠܗ (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 86).

versions of Jesus' trial before the council (Matt 26:65, Mark 14:63, and presumably the Diatessaron) it is recorded that "the high priest tore (ṣarrî)" his garments when he heard Jesus' "blasphemous" response.[26] Ephrem's allusion to that story retains that verb, but instead of describing the high priest as tearing "his garment," describes the high priest as tearing "his bosom" ('ûba[wy]), the same word translated as "calyxes". By slightly adjusting the language, Ephrem crafts a parallel between the blossoming buds that "tear open" to reveal their rose blossoms (which then become plaited floral wreaths for the feast), and the "tearing" of the high priest, which reveals Christ to be the true priest.

The use of the imagery of April's flowers provides Ephrem with a metaphorical framework to unite the paschal celebration of the church (represented by garlands of roses) and the account of Jesus' Passion. Such an approach exemplifies the interrelation between natural imagery and the Bible in Ephrem's poetic imagination: the imagery of a budding flower serves to relate the text to the world of the audience, and the Bible in turn bestows a hidden significance upon that image.

Later stanzas in Res. 3 continue to echo the theme of "tearing" or "breaking." He uses the repetition of the verbal root ṣarrî in Matt 27:51 to great effect. The Syriac biblical text gives Ephrem a common vocabulary to draw together the events of Jesus' death—the tearing (eṣtrî) of the Temple veil and the breaking (eṣtrî) of rocks in the earthquake following Jesus' death.[27] This provides Ephrem with a parallel between the actions of the high priest, who is likewise described as "tearing" (ṣarrî) his bosom, and the tearing of the Temple veil, with both serving to demonstrate the cessation of Jewish ritual institutions in favor of Christ and the church.

> [*Res.* 3.10] In April, the thick cloak, darkness, is torn apart entirely.
> Lightning strikes in the darkness, its flashes splitting it.[28]
> [In] the feast that took place in April: the tombs split open through a
>   voice.
> Death, killer of all, heard
> the voice that is the Life-giver of all,
> and yielded up its treasures. Glory to you, Son of the Life-giver of all![29]

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26   For more on Ephrem's use of this verb, see Chapter 2, section 2.4.1.
27   The verb appears in both the *os* and Peshitta versions.
28   I.e., the darkness.
29   ܐܘܗ ܐܟܝܐ ܐܟܕܚ ܐܬܕܚ ܟܠܗ ܢܘܣܡ ܗܬܒܗܕܚ ‖ ܘܬܣܗ ܟܬܒܐ ܐܟܕܒܚ ܓܝܘܬܚ ܠܟ
      ܘܢܥܣܬܢ‖ ܐܒܪܚ ‖ ܢܘܣܡ ܐܘܗܢ ܐܪܚܐ ܚܕܬܐ ܟܥܡ ܓܙ, ܡܗ ‖ ܟܠ ܪܘܒܟܐܘܚ,

Once more, Ephrem sets the stage by evoking the month of April—in this case, its thunderstorms. Just as in previous stanzas Ephrem imagined the Temple and high priest tearing (*ṣarrî*) their garments, and the calyx of a flower splitting (*ṣarrî*) to reveal its blossom, here he likewise invokes the lightning of spring storms, tearing open (*ṣarrî*) the darkness, its "cloak". Ephrem then parallels that flashing lightning to the "voice" of Jesus which "split" the tombs and brought the dead (Death's "treasures") to life. Unsurprisingly, Ephrem turns to the account of Matt 27:52–53 to evoke the events of Jesus' crucifixion, and especially the confrontation between Jesus and the personified Death. Ephrem notably adjusts the wording of Matt 27:52 from a passive statement "the tombs were opened" (*w-etptaḥ*[*w*] *qabrê*) to an active verb: "the tombs split open". He also uses the verb found in verse 51 to describe the tearing of the Temple curtain and the breaking of the rocks (*ṣarrî*). In this portrayal, then, Jesus' dying cry becomes the active agent responsible for "splitting open" the tombs and raised the dead.

In the following poem (*Res.* 4), the personified April once more occupies center stage. He is the one who spurs the poet to "speak" in the form of a *madrāšâ*, as Ephrem portrays it in the opening line of the poem: "Eloquent April counsels me to be bold, ask, and speak, my Lord."[30] Indeed, throughout the entirety of this *madrāšâ*, April is an active participant. He brings spring's beauty into the world, as Ephrem writes in stanza 4: "he weaves the earth, clothing it in a garment of all colors."[31]

The final seven stanzas of *Res.* 4 function as a kind of ode to April, praising the month as "great" (*îreb*), "gentle" (*bhîlâ*), "glorious" (*šbîḥâ*) and "sweet" (*bsîmâ*).[32] And near the end of the poem, the poet imagines April as an attentive manager, a "steward of symbols" (*rabbaytâ d-rāzê*) who "was running after our Lord when he arrived."[33] Moses, he says, had entrusting his "symbols" into April's care. April's role as "steward of symbols" reveals something of how Ephrem understood the relationship between the natural world (April's flowers, warmth, and thunderstorms) and the stories of the Bible, particular the Exodus and the account of the Passion and death of Jesus commemorated at Pascha. As a steward, April is entrusted with the care of these divinely revealed signs, which every year reinscribe one another. April mirrors Jesus' own actions

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ܐܝܟ ܡܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܡܚܬܚܡ ܒܪ ܐܝܟܐ ܠܝ ܐܘܪܩܚܘ ܡܫܚܡ ܐܪܝܟ ܐ \ ܘܐܪܝܟ ܓܠܠ ܕܐ ܗܘܕܐ ܐܪܝܟ ܟ ܐܪܝܟ ܟ
ܠܠ (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 87).

30   *Res.* 4.2.

31   *Res.* 4.4.

32   *Res.* 4.9, 10, 11, 12 (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 91).

33   ܢܣܡ ܪܗܛ ܠܓܒ ܗܘܐ ܝܕܥ ܣܪܐ ܕܐܪܝܟܐ (*Res.* 4.15; ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 92).

(especially the act of "releasing" those who are bound by winter), thus revealing itself to be "great" among the months.[34] While Jesus set free the prisoners of Sheol, who "tore open their tombs (*ṣraw qabrayhûn*)" (an allusion to Matt 27:52), April similarly liberates those imprisoned by winter, especially merchants.[35] In this case, Ephrem directs his audience to see the experience of spring's arrival as mirroring the narrative of Jesus' descent to the underworld.

The central role Ephrem assigns to April in many of his poems, both as a personified character and as a source of natural symbolism, leads us to wonder why. Brock suggests that the preeminence of April/Nisan in Jewish and Christian sources from the late antique Near East could attest to ongoing debates between adherents of an autumn new year and those who favored the older Mesopotamian spring new year (with Nisan as the first month).[36] It seems almost certain that the ancient tradition of marking the new year in Nisan lies in the background for Ephrem here, given how he portrays the month as "victorious" over all rivals and as a time of new beginnings and growth. Yet these particular poems are profoundly uninterested in calendrical polemic. Ephrem adapts the trope of the personified and "victorious" April to support his reworking of biblical narratives and to connect those narratives to the springtime festival of his church. In his hands, April's own actions come to both echo and reframe the events of the Passion and death of Jesus.

3.2   *April and Springtime Imagery*

As we have already seen, Ephrem associates many natural phenomena with the month of April, and by extension, with the death of Jesus and the paschal feast. In an essay on the imagery associated with the month of Nisan in the *madrāšê On the Resurrection*, Rouwhorst shows that many of these motifs of spring that we find in this cycle (for example, sunshine and darkness, bees and flowers, melting ice, and the ability of sailors to sail) also appear in several fourth-century Greek Christian texts for Pascha.[37] These shared motifs, he argues, are due to a common Hellenistic "canon" of stock images and motifs for spring. As evidence for this claim, Rouwhorst cites a pre-Christian Hellenistic

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34   Once again, this language calls to mind a dispute poem in which April demonstrates its superiority over the other months, as Brock has pointed out (Brock, "Dispute of the Months," 185).

35   *Res.* 4.9 (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 91).

36   Brock, "Dispute of the Months," 186.

37   Rouwhorst, "L'évocation du mois de Nisan." Rouwhorst cites three Greek texts: the anonymous Greek homily *In Sanctum Pascha* (mentioned above); a portion of Eusebius of Caesarea's treatise *On the Paschal Feast* (*PG* 24.696–697); and a selection from a homily of Gregory of Nazianzus for the Sunday after Pascha (*PG* 36.617–620).

Greek poem that contains many of the same springtime motifs.[38] Ultimately, he contends that these fourth-century Christian writers (including Ephrem) drew upon traditional poetic imagery in order to support the new Nicene decree on the date of Easter.

Since the Council of Nicaea is said to have decreed that Pascha should never be celebrated prior to the spring equinox, Rouwhorst argues that the use of familiar springtime motifs in Christian paschal literature could have helped to solidify the new date of Pascha and further differentiate it from the Jewish Passover.[39] The fact that spring imagery, and references to the month of Nisan, are missing from any earlier Quartodeciman sources (or other early Syriac sources with Quartodeciman roots) lends credence to this argument. This recognition of clear links between Ephrem and contemporaneous Greek Christian writers represents an important development in our understanding of Ephrem's literary context. However he accessed these literary traditions, it is clear that he drew upon this source material to aid in the composition of his *madrāšê*. Further, and more significantly for our purposes, these external resources shaped Ephrem's presentation of the festal season and the Gospel texts central to its celebration. Indeed, for Ephrem, the traditional springtime motifs become the controlling metaphors for framing this moment in sacred time—both the crucifixion itself and the celebration of the church.

Among the most common of these is the imagery of thunderstorms: references to thunder and lightning pervade these *madrāšê*. Indeed, Ephrem regularly uses "thunder" as a metaphor for positive sound. For example, like the booming spring thunder outdoors, the collective voices of the church "thunder forth" (*rʿem*) in praise at the Paschal feast.[40] Elsewhere, in *Cruc.* 7, Ephrem portrays the "voice" of the dying Jesus as "thunder" that brought forth "blossoms" of the dead:

> [*Cruc.* 7.3] Let Moses offer you a crown of the righteous,
> who also plaited for you the bones of the just that were put back
>   together.
> And at the thunder of your voice they sprouted up as blossoms.
> In the month of April, there was April in Sheol;
> the countenances of the dead became joyful.

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38 The poem survives in the *Palatine Anthology* (ed. Pierre Waltz and Guy Soury, *Anthologie grecque. Première partie. Anthologie Palatine*, Vol. 8, [Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1974], 5–6).
39 Rouwhorst, "L'évocation," 109–110.
40 *Res.* 2.2–3 (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 83). Cf. *Res.* 4.3,10. For this analysis, see also Hartung et al., trans., *Songs for the Fast and Pascha*, 22.

> See how their dried-up bones became resplendent!
> See how their snuffed-out beauty shone![41]

While the reference to Moses is somewhat opaque, this obscure stanza becomes more clear in light of my earlier examination of Ephrem's use of Matt 27:52–53. Once more, Ephrem returns here to the central event for his interpretation of the Passion narrative: the life-giving "voice" of Jesus from the cross, which brought the dead out of the tombs. In the festal context, he evokes the natural phenomena of springtime (thunderstorms and flowers to reimagine the raising of the dead at Jesus' death). He depicts the dying "voice" of Jesus as thunder in a spring storm, bringing dead bones to life as flowers to be plaited into a garland.[42] Through this evocative image of "April in Sheol," Ephrem reimagines the events of the death of Jesus as the dead "sprouting up" from their tombs like flowers.[43] As Beck speculates, Moses, as the most significant representative of the saints raised at Jesus' death, could be functioning as the one who presents the garland on behalf of all the others.[44] The idea of "crowns" plaited with spring blossoms is a recurring feature found in this poem (*Cruc.* 7), and several others.[45] In *Cruc.* 7, April, Moses, the sun, the four cardinal directions, and the heights and depths all weave crowns for Christ. Such an image befits a festival taking place during what Ephrem calls elsewhere "the month of flowers."[46] Indeed, the frequent reoccurence of the motif of plaited flower garlands raises the question of whether garlands played some kind of liturgical role in Ephrem's Pascha. If so, Ephrem's poems would offer evocative

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41   ܟܘܒܐ ܢܗܘܐ ܠܢ ܟܠܠܐ ܘܗܝܬܩܘܢ | ܘܐܟܙܢܐ ܗܕܐ ܟܙܐܘ ܗܘܢ ܠܝ ܠܟܠ ܕܗܝܬܩܘܢ |
ܐܘܟܒܗܟܐ ܘܠܝ ܗܟܟ ܟܐܙܟ ܟܐܟܘܗ ܘܠܗܘ | ܗܝܘ ܢܘܗ ܗܘܐ ܗܘܐ ܟܠܗ ܠܟ ܙܐܟ |
ܗܢܘܩ ܗܗܘܟܐ ܟܐܗܟ ܟܘܗܘܐ ܘ ܗܟܝܟܐܝܟܗ | ܗܘܟܝܗܟܐ ܗܗܟܐ ܗܟܟܝ ܝܘ ܟܐܟ | ܐܘܟܘܗܝ ܟܐ ܗ |
ܟܐܗ ܟܘܢܝܘ (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 69).

42   Cf. *Res.* 4.14.

43   Cf. *Nis.* 39.3, where Ephrem uses the image of "April in Sheol" to describe the opposite sort of event: the death of 600,000 people in the wilderness during the time of Moses. "He made April spring up in Sheol, when a pasture—a pasture of corpses—/ of six hundred thousand fell" (ed. Beck, *Nis. II*, 23). Cf. also *Virg.* 51.8, where the imagery applies to the death and resurrection of Jesus, who "sprouted into a flower in Sheol / and became the Tree of Life that gave life to creation" (ed. Beck, *Virg.*, 164; trans. adapted from McVey, *Hymns*, 463).

44   See Beck, *Paschahymnen*, trans., 56.

45   See especially *Res.* 2, one of the most explicitly liturgical surviving poems of Ephrem, in which the poet imagines the gathered assembly at the "great feast"—including himself, the children, the female choir with their *madrāšê*, the bishop, priest, and deacons, and ordinary congregants—each in their own way weaving "flowers" of praise into a crown for Christ.

46   ܗܝܟܐ ܟܘܟ. See, e.g., *Azym.* 9.1.

parallels between what was visible and present in the festival, the events being commemorated there (Jesus' death, Moses' Exodus), and creation itself.

The month of April (Nisan) therefore played a major role in Ephrem's conceptualization of the events of the Passion and death of Jesus and the paschal feast celebrated in his church. He portrayed the personified month of April as a participant in the events about which his community read in liturgy—the Exodus and the Passion of Jesus. The month (and the traditional poetic imagery associated with spring which Ephrem used to evoke it) was the consistent thematic through-line Ephrem drew upon to link the Old Testament "symbols" of the Exodus, the Passion and death of Jesus, and the festal experience of the Christian community.

4   Ephrem's Cosmic Chronology of the Death of Jesus

4.1   *Chronological Parallelism*
In *Res.* 4, which I discussed above, Ephrem emphasizes April's centrality to the whole story of Jesus—it was not only the month of his death, but also his conception: in one April, he descended from heaven, and in another he rose.[47]

> [*Res.* 4.13] It is in April that our Lord came down from the heights,
> and Mary received him. It is in April, again,
> that he was raised and went up, and again, Mary saw him.[48]

To be clear, Ephrem is speaking here of Jesus' conception, not his birth. Ephrem regularly speaks of Jesus' incarnation as a "descent" from heaven.[49] Moreover, Mary's action here is simply to "receive," or perhaps "conceive" (*qeblat*) the incarnate Lord. This all fits a description of Jesus' conception taking place in April. Ephrem crafts a close relationship between the events of the Son's descent from heaven and his death and resurrection (which he speaks of as an ascent). In both situations, "Mary" was present and active.[50]

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47   See *Res.* 4.10, 13.

48   ܟܒ ܗܘ ܢܚܬ ܡܪܢ ܐܝܟ ܗܘ ܪܡܐ ܢܢܝ ܩܒܠܬܗ ܡܪܝܡ / ܘܒܚܠܬܐ ܗܪܡܬ ܗܘ ܗܘ ܩܒ ܚܠܬܢ / ܐܬܢܚܪ ܢܢܝܡ ܩܒ ܘܗܘܬ ܩܒܠܡ (ed. Beck, *Pachahymnen*, 92).

49   See Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 53.

50   Ephrem is either alluding to a non-canonical tradition of a resurrection appearance of Jesus to his mother Mary, or to Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Jesus (John 20:11–18).

In this section, I will further analyze similar examples of chronological parallelism in Ephrem's *madrāšê* and situate this phenomenon within the context of early Christian chronographic speculation. Ephrem draws upon these speculations and utilizes them to construct a cosmic chronology, in which other events in biblical history point to the Passion and death of Jesus.

In drawing chronological parallels between pivotal events in Jesus' life, Ephrem reflects a broader trend among early Christian writers. The idea that Jesus' conception date aligned with the date of his death became widespread in the fourth and fifth centuries, with one early example being the short Latin tractate *On the Solstices and Equinoxes* (early fourth century), which is widely believed to be the product of a Syriac speaking author.[51]

In fact, many scholars (particularly the proponents of the "Calculation Theory" of the origins of the date of Christmas) have argued that the speculative process of dating important moments in Jesus' life to align with the major points on the solar calendar led to the celebration of Christmas on December 25 (or January 6 in some parts of the east, including Syria and Mesopotamia).[52] While this hypothesis is ultimately concerned with Christmas, it has broader ramifications. Many early Christians believed that Jesus' crucifixion took place on the spring equinox, which in the theorized year of Jesus' death fell on March 25 in the solar calendar. Alternatively, some thought that Jesus was crucified on April 6, for similar reasons.[53] For the sake of parallelism, March 25 or April 6 were also frequently offered as the date of Jesus'

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51   See Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, Minn.: Pueblo, 1991), 92–93; Thomas C. Schmidt, "Calculating December 25 as the Birth of Jesus in Hippolytus' 'Canon' and 'Chronicon.'" *vc* 69, no. 5 (2015): 542–563, 562–563. For the text of *On the Solstices and Equinoxes*, see Bernard Botte, *Les origines de la Noel et de l'Epiphanie* (Leuven: Peeters, 1932), 88–105.

52   For a summary of the "Calculation Theory" as an explanation for the date of Christmas, see Talley, *Origins*, 79–155. More recently, see also C.P.E. Nothaft, "The Origins of the Christmas Date: Some Recent Trends in Historical Research," *Church History* 81, no. 4 (2012): 903–911. James F. Coakley surveyed the Syriac evidence, arguing that the early Syriac celebration of Christmas on January 6 had its origins in the theory that the creation of Adam took place on April (Nisan) 6, and the second Adam was likewise conceived on the same day. Adding nine months to this day, they arrived at January 6 as the date of Christ's birth. ("Typology and the birthday of Christ on 6 January," in *v Symposium Syriacum 1988*: *Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven, 29–31 Août 1988*, OCA 236 [Rome: Pontifical Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1990], 247–256).

53   Talley elsewhere argues that the calculation of April 6 as the date for Jesus' death (and conception), which was known in the east, was, like March 25, derived from adapting the Jewish lunar date of 14 Nisan to local variants of the solar calendar. In this case, the fourteenth day of the first month of the year (Artemisios) in the Asian calendar in use in Anatolia was equivalent to April 6 in our reckoning. (Thomas J. Talley, "Further Light on

conception, thus leading after a perfect nine months in the womb to Jesus' birth date on December 25 or January 6.

Given the odd methods and underlying assumptions of these sorts of chronological speculations, they are undeniably challenging for modern scholars to take seriously. Thomas Schmidt, however, cautions against ignoring these obscure early Christian disputes, arguing that "these are precisely the things that ancient and medieval chronologists cared about and it is therefore what gives us a window into their thought world."[54] That is exactly the value of understanding the underlying logic of what Ephrem was doing here. Given his emphasis on the month of April, I suspect that he took the view that the crucifixion occurred on April 6 rather than March 25. The fact that this is not clear attests to the fact that Ephrem (at least in the texts that survive) did not speculate openly about dates, or engage in debates on such matters. Still, Ephrem clearly drew on the assumptions of these chronological speculations (which likely had circulated among educated Christian circles for generations) and found them to be evidence of a cosmic harmony attesting to the significance of Jesus' salvific actions. Understanding the methods by which Christian chronographers arrived at their conclusions thus gives us valuable insight into the workings of Ephrem's theological imagination.

In *Eccl.* 51, itself apparently a paschal *madrāšâ*, Ephrem expands the scope of the chronological parallels even further to encompass the creation and sin of Adam:

> [*Eccl.* 51.8] In the month of April our Lord repaid
> the debts of the first Adam.
> He gave sweat in April for the sweat of Adam,
> and the cross in place of his tree,
> the Friday in place of the Friday,
> and through his reply he returned the thief to Eden,
> and it seems that April also was the month of Adam:
> as he aligned the day with the day,
> so it is proper that he would align the month with the month.[55]

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the Quartodeciman Pascha and the Date of the Annunciation," *Studia Liturgica* 33 [2003]: 151–158, 152).

54   Schmidt, "Calculating December 25," 546.

55   ܚܢܘܢ ܢܣܒ ܒܢܝܣܢ ܗܘܐ ܡܪܢ ܚܢܒܢ / ܣܘܬܐܬܗܘ ܕܐܕܡ ܡܪܟܢܐ / ܝܗܒ ܕܘܐܬܗܐ ܒܢܝܣܢ ܚܠܦܥ ܕܘܐܬܗ ܣܠܩ ܕܐܕܡ / ܘܨܠܝܒܐ [ܘܡܣܒܘ] ܣܠܩ ܚܣܣܗ / ܥܪܘܒܬܐ ܣܠܩ [ܡܪܟܢܐ] / ܐܬܪܐ ܕܘܚܠܐ ܓܕܪ ܠܝܢܣܗܐ ܠܓܢ / ܘܚܒܙ ܐܕ ܢܝܣܢ ܐܘܦ ܢܣܒ ܕܐܕܡ ܗܘܐ ,ܘܡܘܬܗ ܐܘܦܣܗ / ܕܓܢܟܬ ܢܘܣܪ ܠܢܘܣܐ ܐܦ ܢܘܣܐ (ed. Beck, *Eccl.*, 132–133).

In a previous chapter, I discussed the debt payment imagery present in this stanza; here I want to focus on what it says about time. In line with Jewish exegetical tradition, Ephrem sees April (Nisan) as the month of creation (and also the "fall" of Adam into sin).[56] Following Genesis 1:26, where God creates humanity on the sixth day (Friday) and rests on a seventh (Saturday), Ephrem places Adam's creation and disobedience on that Friday, which he links to the Friday of the crucifixion. The emphasis on Friday may also allude to the liturgical celebration of a Paschal Triduum beginning on Friday.[57] The overall effect of the stanza is to create a harmonious synchronicity between the creation of the world and its salvation through the death of Jesus. We see this also with the reference to Jesus sending the thief on the cross back to the Garden of Eden from which Adam had been exiled.

4.2 The Exodus and Passover in Ephrem's Cosmic Chronology

As we saw above in *Res.* 3, replacement theology was central to Ephrem's imagined cosmic chronology. April "stripped away" the great festival of Pascha and gave it to the Gentiles.[58] The implication behind this brief reference recurs repeatedly, especially in the *madrāšê* collection *On the Unleavened Bread*, which often exhort Ephrem's Christian audience to refrain from participating in Passover and the days of Unleavened Bread.[59] In *Azym.* 18, for instance, Ephrem warns his audience that the *matzah* would be a "deadly poison" (*sām mawtâ*), as it no longer contains the "medicine of life" (*sām ḥayyê*) which Jesus washed from it during the Last Supper.[60] In this section, I will examine how Ephrem tries to rule out any continued celebration of Passover by attempting to interpret the Exodus narrative as a pattern which prefigured the timing of Jesus' death. In the process, Ephrem weaves the Exodus into his universal chronology.

Unfortunately, we know nothing of the specific situations that prompted Ephrem to such extreme rhetoric. There were likely social reasons for his particularly vehement opposition to Passover. At the most basic level, the festivals

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56 Cf. *Cruc.* 6.15, *Comm. Gen.* 12. See Kronholm, *Motifs from Genesis 1–11*, 133–134. The Babylonian Talmud (*b. Roš Haš* 10b–11a) reflects a dispute between those who believed that Nisan was the month of creation (and other important events), represented by R. Joshua, and those who believed that Tishri was the month of creation (and many other important events), represented by R. Eliezer. See Talley, *Origins*, 81–82.

57 For the early development of the Triduum Paschal celebration in the region, see Rouwhorst, *Hymnes pascales*, Vol. 1, 193–195. Aphrahat sometimes just refers to the Paschal feast as "Friday" (Rouwhorst, *Hymnes pascales*, Vol. 1, 144–145).

58 Ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 86.

59 See especially *Azym.* 17–19, 21.

60 *Azym.* 18.16.

shared the same Syriac name (*pasḥâ*), and they were celebrated around the same time.[61] Perhaps Christians were actively participating in the rites of their Jewish neighbors. Alternatively, it is possible that Ephrem could have been targeting a Christianized celebration of the week of Unleavened Bread following Passover, which we know to have existed in the region. Aphrahat alludes to Syriac Christians engaging in this practice, although he critiques it as unnecessary and problematic.[62] Perhaps such activities lay in the background of Ephrem's polemic here. Regardless of the exact situation, Ephrem's willingness to engage in open polemic on this issue sets it apart from his relative silence on the matter of the date of Pascha.

The book of Exodus was probably read in Ephrem's church during or around the time of Pascha, and thus, in his *madrāšê* for this season, he sought to explain the significance of those narratives for his audience.[63] The poems would therefore have served as sung commentaries on these liturgical readings, explaining their meaning and even further weaving them together with the stories of Jesus' passion and death to form a singular biblical "tapestry."[64] In this Christian reading, it was essential to situate the Exodus and Passover within a universal chronology that would serve to explain the existence of the church and its Pascha as distinct from that of neighboring Jews. Critique of Jewish interpretations of the Exodus narrative was thus central to the construction of an alternative, Christian reading of the text.

Like earlier Quartodeciman writings such as Melito's *Peri Pascha*, many of Ephrem's Paschal hymns contain extended reimaginings of the Exodus narrative, with a particular focus on the instructions for the Passover meal in Exodus 12 and the image of Jesus as the Paschal lamb. Ephrem also linked a wide variety of Old Testament sacrificial imagery with the Passover sacrifice, as Christians had long done.[65] Ephrem, however, was not systematic in his engagement with these themes.

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61   That being said, Ephrem is still vague on the exact relationship between the Jewish and Christian festivals with regard to the time of their celebration.

62   Aphrahat, *Dem.* 12.12. For more analysis, see Rouwhorst, *Hymnes pascales*, Vol. 1, 150–153.

63   See Wickes, "Between Liturgy and School," 37–38; Rouwhorst, *Les hymnes pascales*, Vol. 1, 193.

64   Hartung et al., trans., *Songs for the Fast and Pascha*, 27.

65   Cf. *Azym.* 2.2–8. Hebrews 9 offers an early example of this "remixing" of Old Testament sacrificial material. For the development of the imagery of sacrifice in Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity, see Robert J. Daly, s.j., *Sacrifice Unveiled: The True Meaning of Christian Sacrifice* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 40–98; George Heyman, *The Power of Sacrifice: Roman and Christian Discourse in Conflict* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 95–159.

On the basic chronological question of when exactly Jesus nullified the sacrificial rites (including Passover), Ephrem offers two different answers, depending on the particular subject matter of individual *madrāšê*. The first is that Jesus abolished Passover when he ate the Passover meal at the Last Supper.[66] "In you," Ephrem writes, addressing the evening of the Last Supper, "our Lord ate the small Pascha, / and became the great Pascha."[67] The second answer imagines Jesus himself slain on Passover as the final and "true" Passover Lamb. The *madrāšê* that cite the first example (e.g., *Azym.* 6, *Azym.* 19, and *Cruc.* 3) are singly focused on constructing a typological relationship between Jesus and the Passover meal. The *madrāšâ* that offers the second explanation (*Cruc.* 5) is entirely composed of (often polemical) reflections on the various events of the Passion narrative. In this context, Ephrem's emphasis on Jesus as the "offering" (*qurbānâ*) "whom they slaughtered with the lambs" (*d-ʿam emrê nkas*[*w*]) is a natural outgrowth of the larger emphasis of the poem.[68] Once more, we can see the unsystematic and occasional character of Ephrem's imagination at work. He is willing to subordinate a precise chronology to the particular themes and polemical focus of individual *madrāšê*.

As part of his broader effort to imagine the Passover instructions of Exodus 12 as typologically related to the death of Jesus, Ephrem links these commandments to the exact chronology of Jesus' death, once more creating chronological parallels between the events.

> [*Cruc.* 3.1] On the fortieth [day] he slaughtered the paschal lamb
> "between the suns" as it is written:
> it was inscribed beforehand that it would be sunset,
> so that even his time was prophesied about him.
> The true lamb who was slain teaches us
> how perfect is his time: on the fifteenth, he was slain,
> the day on which the pair of luminaries were full.[69]

This passage reads the Passover commandments for signs of the time of Jesus' crucifixion. Christ, the "true lamb" is presented here as a teacher who points

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66   Cf. *Azym.* 6; 19.1–4; *Cruc.* 3.2. Cf. also Cyrillona, *Euch.* 1–20, 111–121.

67   ܟܢܝ ܒܟ ܐܟܠ ܡܪܢ ܦܨܚܐ ܕܚܕܬܐ / ܘܗܘܐ ܠܗ ܗܘ ܦܨܚܐ ܪܒܐ (*Cruc.* 3.2; ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 49).

68   *Cruc.* 5.18 (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 63).

69   ܒܐܪܒܥܝܢܐ ܢܟܣ ܐܡܪܐ ܕܦܨܚܐ / ܒܝܢܬ ܫܡܫܐ ܠܡ ܐܝܟ ܕܟܬܝܒ / ܡܩܕܡ ܪܫܝܡ
       ܗܘܐ ܕܢܚܙܐ ܗܘܐ ܠܗ ܕܒܐ / ܕܐܦ ܚܢܬܐ ܙܠܡܗ, ܐܬܢܒܝ, / ܐܡܪܐ ܫܪܝܪܐ ܕܐܬܢܟܣ /
       ܟܠܗ ܠܡ ܡܟܡ ܠܚܢܝ / ܕܒܚܡܫܬܥܣܪ ܢܟܣܬܐ ܢܨܝܒ ܗܘܐ / ܒܝܘܡ ܕܒܗ ܗܘܐ ܐܝ ܢܗܝܪܐ
       (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 49).

to keys to "his time" hidden within the earlier text, "inscribed" in advance for the purpose of instruction. Ephrem's interpretation here raises questions and offers insights into how he thought about certain events of the Passion narrative.

The reference to "sunset" (*ʿrāb*), for example, is puzzling, since the synoptic gospels place Jesus' death at the "ninth hour" (mid-afternoon). There is, however, a logic to this. As we will see in the final section of this chapter, Ephrem places great stress on the three hours of darkness while Jesus was on the cross, lasting from noon until the ninth hour, when he died. He argues in *Cruc.* 6 that this period of darkness constituted a period of night, and the three hours that followed, between Jesus' death and sunset on Friday, were a new day. Applying that logic here can help us make sense of the reference to "sunset" and to the Passover commandment that the lamb must be slaughtered "between the suns" (*bet šemšê*).

With this reading, Ephrem diverges from the Peshitta text of Exodus 12:6, which reads *bet ramšê*. Ephrem's "between the suns" is almost identical with the expression *bnay šemšata* (ביני שמשתא) that appears in the Aramaic Targums for this passage.[70] This common usage attest to a variant reading circulating in Aramaic dialects in late antiquity. Further, when we consider Ephrem's use of this expression in light of *Cruc.* 6, "between the suns" can also be understood as a reference to Jesus dying in this period of darkness between two "days." Since Jesus died at the time that the darkness was lifting, the exact moment of Jesus' death could also be described as a kind of "twilight" between darkness and light. For this reason, Ephrem's use of this phrase makes sense; it should not be translated as "evening," as in Beck's German translation.[71]

In the reference to the "pair of luminaries" (the sun and moon) being full, Ephrem probably reflects both the longstanding tradition that Passover should fall on a full moon, and a broader early Christian interest in aligning Jesus' death with the spring equinox.[72] This again, shows Ephrem's familiarity with the traditions of speculation on the date of the crucifixion, as a result of which it was widely accepted that the death of Jesus took place on that significant date for the solar calendar (either March 25 or April 6). The mention of the "fifteenth" day is more difficult to explain. This could perhaps be an intentional choice to align the date of Jesus' death with the beginning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Lev 23:6). Yet Ephrem elsewhere places the death of Jesus on 14 Nisan,

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70   See Robert Hayward and Michael Maher, trans., *Targum Neofiti 1: Exodus* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1994), 49. See also Rouwhorst, *Hymnes pascales*, vol. 2, 55, n. 1.

71   Trans. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 40.

72   For other references to this idea in Ephrem's writings, see *Cruc.* 4.15, *Eccl.* 51.6.

following the chronology of the Gospel of John and the Quartodeciman tradition. For this reason, Rouwhorst doubts the authenticity of this stanza, but I am not convinced.[73] The close parallels we find here with other, quite technical, chronological conclusions elsewhere in Ephrem's writings lend weight to his authorship of the stanza. It is easy to imagine a scribal error or even an authorial mistake being responsible for the "fifteenth."

Over the course this stanza, we see Ephrem delving into possible chronological prefigurations of the crucifixion in the Passover commandments of Exodus 12. Ephrem's interpretation raises questions about his understanding of certain details of the chronology of the Passion narrative, a subject to which I will return in the final section of this chapter.

In these publicly performed *madrāšê* composed for the Paschal feast, Ephrem attempted to place the Jewish Passover and its foundational narrative in a Christocentric theological context and to invalidate participation in its rites. In the process, Ephrem imagined a firm division between the Jewish and Christian Paschas, supporting the Christian claim to celebrate the "true" Pascha and to be the proper heirs of the biblical tradition. In this context, he drew chronological parallels between the timing of the Passover and the events of Jesus' Passion and death, thus linking it to his broader theological interest in chronological parallelism. Ephrem drew upon the speculations about the dates of Jesus' conception and death, and about the creation and "fall" of Adam, and used them to construct a cosmic chronology, in which he portrayed the other events in biblical history as pointing forward to the Passion and death of Jesus.

5   Paschal Chronology: Ephrem and the "Three Day Problem" (*Cruc.* 6)

Several texts attributed to Ephrem demonstrate a concern with reconciling the chronologies of the Passion narrative, but this is especially true in the sixth *madrāšâ On the Crucifixion.* This poem, in which Ephrem uses both biblical typologies and his knowledge of astronomy and the calendar to reconcile the paschal chronologies, reveals that there was some exegetical interest in the subject of the chronology of the Passion narrative in Ephrem's community. By weaving the chronology of the Passion narrative into a larger context, Ephrem in this poem also parallels the symbolic construction of time we explored in the previous section. He was not merely interested in repeating the traditional

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73   Rouwhorst, *Hymnes pascales*, Vol. 1, 34.

resolution to the exegetical problem in question, but in demonstrating how his construction of the paschal chronology fit within a larger chronology of the universe, as demonstrated by the solar and lunar calendars.[74]

The New Testament variously describes Jesus' resurrection as occurring "on the third day,"[75] "in three days,"[76] "after three days,"[77] and most notoriously, "three days and three nights," as found in Matthew's first account of the "sign of Jonah" (Mt. 12:40). "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." If Jesus died on Friday afternoon and was raised on Sunday morning, how could that possibly add up to three days and three nights? This is the question that prompts Ephrem's complex and creative response in *Cruc.* 6.

As we have seen throughout this study, Ephrem rarely interacted with biblical passages as a commentator, focusing on interpretive problems and attempting to resolve them. Instead, in his *madrāšê*, he tended to use allusions and references to the gospel text in order to create dramatic retellings of the story of Jesus' death. *Cruc.* 6 is a unique example of Ephrem engaging in careful exegesis to resolve an interpretative problem raised by the gospel Passion narrative. The poem also offers clear evidence of Ephrem's role as a teacher and his use of *madrāšê* as didactic exegetical tools in that context.

In what follows, I will first provide background to the three-day problem by comparing Ephrem's answer with those of other early Christian writers, particularly in the Syriac tradition. I will then analyze the contents of the poem, situating Ephrem's chronology of the three days within the context of late ancient calendars and astronomy. Finally, I will offer some conclusions about the different performative venues in which Ephrem imagined and made sense of the story of Jesus' death. This analysis will shed new light on the contexts in which Ephrem's poems were performed and the roles they played within the Christian communities of northern Mesopotamia.

5.1   *The Three-Day Problem in Context*

First of all, we should note that many early Christian writers were apparently unconcerned with addressing the chronological discrepancy between Matt

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74   An earlier version of this section was published as a standalone essay: Blake Hartung, "The Significance of Astronomical and Calendrical Theories for Ephrem's Interpretation of the Three Days of Jesus' Death," in *Syriac Christian Culture: Beginnings to Renaissance*, ed. Aaron M. Butts and Robin Darling Young (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 37–49. See also Hartung, trans., *Songs for the Fast and Pascha*, 30–33.

75   See, e.g., Matt. 16:21, 17:23, 20:19, 26:61; Luke 13:32, 18:33, 24:7; 1 Cor 15:4.

76   See, e.g., Matt 26:61; Mark 14:58; Jn 2:19.

77   See, e.g., Mark 9:31, 10:34.

12:40 and the chronologies of the Passion narratives. For example, one of the earliest Christian reflections on the "sign of Jonah" saying comes from Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*. Justin glosses over the difficulty raised by the passage, saying only that: "Though these words were veiled in mystery, his listeners could understand that he would arise from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion."[78] Similarly, in the early third century, Origen, in his *Commentary on Matthew*, does not address how "three days and three nights" could be reconciled with other passages, but instead takes the "sign of Jonah" saying as an opportunity to expound a model for reading the Old Testament in light of the New.[79] These examples reflect a typical approach to the three-day problem in early Greek-speaking Christianity.

Gregory of Nyssa, writing over a century after Origen, is an exception to this general rule. In a paschal homily (*De tridui spatio*), he acknowledges the chronological problems posed by "three days and three nights," and offers a solution: the three days and three nights began on Thursday at the Last Supper, and the second day and night were the period of darkness and light on the Friday of the crucifixion.[80] This explanation is strikingly similar to that provided by Ephrem in *Cruc.* 6. Indeed, a solution very like Gregory's has an impressive pedigree in early Syriac literature. Gregory's convergence with interpretations known elsewhere only in Syriac raises questions of transmission that I will address further below.

Aphrahat's twelfth *Demonstration*, written in Syriac in the early fourth century, similarly suggests that the three days began at the Last Supper, when Jesus broke his body and poured out his blood. As in the explanation provided by Gregory, the initial night of Jesus' "death" was actually metaphorical. We can summarize Aphrahat's chronology as follows: the first night and day began Thursday night and ran through noon (the "sixth hour") on Friday. The second night and day consisted of the three hours of darkness and subsequent three hours of light on Friday until sundown. The third night and day were made up of the night of Friday (the night of the Sabbath) and the full Sabbath day.[81]

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78   Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 107.1 (ed. Miroslav Marcovitch, *Iustini Martyris Dialogus cum Tryphone*, PTS 47 [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997], 472; trans. Thomas B. Falls and Thomas P. Halton, *Dialogue with Trypho*, Selections from the Fathers of the Church 3 [Washington: Catholic University of America Press], 161).

79   Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 12.3; ed. Erwin Preuschen, *Origenes Werke IV. Commentarius in Iohannem*, GCS 10 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1903), 73.7.

80   Gregory of Nyssa, *De tridui spatio* (ed. Gebhardt, 286–290). See Hans Boersma, "Overcoming Time and Space: Gregory of Nyssa's Anagogical Theology," *JECS* 20 (2012): 575–612, 594–595.

81   Aphrahat, *Dem.* 12.7; ed. Parisot, *Aphraatis*, 520–521.

Although Aphrahat differs from Ephrem in beginning his chronology at the Last Supper, they both attest to a tradition of reckoning the three hours of darkness on the Friday of the crucifixion as a night, and the following three hours of light before sunset as a day.

The Syriac version of the *Didascalia* (or rather, one Syriac manuscript family of that text) contains a Passion week chronology that shares much with Ephrem's attempt to reconcile the chronology of the Passion with *Cruc.* 6. This is actually the second Passion week chronology found in the text.[82] This section of the *Didascalia* begins its count of the three days and three nights on the Friday of the crucifixion, and identifies the three hours of darkness and three hours of light as a day and night, respectively.[83] It then places Jesus' resurrection after three hours of night on Saturday evening. As a justification for this interpretation, the *Didascalia* cites Psalm 39:6: "Behold you have set out my days with a measure."[84] Although lacking in detail, this chronology is almost identical to that of Ephrem in *Cruc.* 6.

The Syriac *Commentary on the Diatessaron*—attributed to Ephrem but of disputed authorship—mentions two distinct options for reconciling the chronological questionbeginning the chronology at the Last Supper and counting the period of darkness and light as a day and night. Unfortunately, this passage survives only in Armenian: "From the moment when he broke his body for his disciples and gave it to his apostles, three days are numbered during which he was counted among the dead, like Adam … Or [alternatively], the sixth day must be counted as two and the Sabbath as one."[85] As is typical in this commentary, it acknowledges the existence of different interpretations and does not adjudicate which is "correct."

What is Ephrem's relation to these traditions? If we accept Ephrem's authorship of the *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, then it seems he was aware of traditions beginning the three-day chronology on either Thursday or Friday. The two varying chronologies could attest to two different understandings of when a "day" began—one on the sunset before, with its preceding "night," as in the Mishnah (seen in Aphrahat and the first interpretation offered by the

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82   The first is in section 3, and appears in the other manuscript recension. Following the mainstream scholarly view, that means the first chronology is older. That older chronology, however, stops at Friday and does not address the issue of three days and three nights. See Rouwhorst, Rouwhorst, *Hymnes pascales*, Vol. 1, 183.

83   Surprisingly, however, it places Jesus' Last Supper on the night of Tuesday to Wednesday. Rouwhorst, *Hymnes pascales*, Vol. 1, 184.

84   *Didascalia Apostolorum* 21; ed. Arthur Vööbus, *The Didascalia apostolorum in Syriac* (Textus), CSCO 401/407 (Leuven, Peeters, 1979), 5.14.9–13.

85   *CommDiat* XIX.4 (ed. Leloir, *Version arménienne*, 270; trans. McCarthy, 284).

Commentary on the Diatessaron); and the other at sunrise on the day itself (as in *Cruc*. 6 and the *Didascalia*). Still, both chronologies attest to a common tradition of wrestling with the interpretation of the "sign of Jonah" in Matt 12:40 in light of the gospel Passion narrative.

As for the source of this tradition, it is impossible to trace it to any of the Syriac sources we have discussed, especially given the divergences in their interpretations. Although the original form of the *Didascalia* (likely written in the third century) would be the oldest of the texts mentioned above, the Syriac text of chapter 21 apppears to be heavily redacted.[86] The chronology in question is, in the view of most scholars, a later addition to the text.[87] Rouwhorst attributes the paschal chronology of this section to an anti-Quartodeciman revision (which he convincingly dates to the late fourth century) of an originally Quartodeciman text. The goal of this interpretation, in Rouwhorst's view, must be to promote the expanded celebration of Holy Week and the especially the Paschal Triduum.[88] For his part, Stewart-Sykes sees it as the work of an anti-Jewish "apostolic redactor."[89] Regardless, it is very unlikely that this text could have been the source for Ephrem and Aphrahat. This also rules out the Greek *Didascalia* as the vehicle for transmitting this paschal chronology to Gregory of Nyssa. Given Gregory's knowledge of a tradition otherwise known only in Syriac sources, it is plausible that some otherwise unknown Greek version of this text contained this interpolation, but we cannot say with any certainty.

Why was this issue of such interest to Syriac writers but not to other early Christians? Rouwhorst offers the most reasonable answer, drawing on the evidence of all these texts. Aphrahat's allusion to Christians concerned about the "great day of the feast" (*yawmâ rabbâ d-ʿadʿîdâ*) and the fact that he makes this chronological argument in response to a question about Matt 12:40 posed by unknown interlocutors attest to a liturgical debate.[90] Rouwhorst contends that

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86 Most scholars agree that the *Didascalia* was originally composed in Greek (although the extant Greek text is fragmentary) and later translated into Syriac (likely in the fourth century), Latin, and other languages. For the fragments of the Greek text, see J. Vernon Bartlet, "Fragments of the Didascalia Apostolorum in Greek," *JTS* 18, no. 72 (1917): 301–309. For the question of the original language of composition, see R. Hugh Connolly, *Didascalia Apostolorum: the Syriac version translated and accompanied by the Verona Latin fragments*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929), xi; Vööbus, *Didascalia*, 26–28; Alistair Stewart-Sykes, *The Didascalia Apostolorum: An English Version with Introduction and Annotation*, Studia Traditionis Theologiae: Explorations in Early and Medieval Theology 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 89–90.

87 Rouwhorst, *Hymnes pascales*, Vol. 1, 189.

88 Rouwhorst, *Hymnes pascales*, Vol. 1, 184.

89 Stewart-Sykes, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, 43.

90 *Dem.* 12.5 (ed. Parisot, vol. 1, 516).

this chronology was an attempt to refute the one-night Quartodeciman paschal celebration (on the 14th–15th of Nisan) that was still being practiced by some Christians in the region. So, by extension, he argues, were the chronologies given by Ephrem and one recension of the Syriac *Didascalia*.[91]

While it may well be the case that this exegetical tradition had its origins as a polemic against a Quartodeciman Pascha, Ephrem says nothing of this in *Cruc.* 6 (or, indeed, in the passing reference to the two versions of this argument in the *Commentary on the Diatessaron*). He makes no mention of any alternative views of the chronology, or of the paschal feast, to refute. Perhaps this chronology had become traditional, and no longer had any polemical purpose (if Christians had widely adopted the new celebration of Easter by the time Ephrem wrote the *madrāšâ*). Alternatively, the issue may still have been contested, but Ephrem simply intended the poem for an internal audience, which he assumed was aware of the liturgical tradition. He could then expound upon his interpretation by reference to symbols from the calendar and astronomy. What these sources share, though, is (for modern readers) a strange orientation toward time. Without explanation and rationalization, they simply assume that shorter or longer periods of time could count as a day. In the analysis that follows, I will explain this logic as I examine the contents of *Cruc.* 6.

5.2   Cruc. *6: Analysis*

Cruc. 6 begins with a single reference to Jonah and Christ: "Three days were numbered for the Messiah, just as for Jonah" (st. 1).[92] Although Ephrem does not mention Jonah again for the remainder of the poem, the reference is fundamentally important. It alludes to Matthew 12:40, and sets up the chief problem with which this *madrāšâ* is concerned: the chronology of the Passion and resurrection. Almost immediately after this reference to Jonah and Christ, Ephrem states his solution to the chronological problem:

> [*Cruc.* 6.1] That One who brings darkness and light
> Reckoned the duration and time when it darkened [as] a day.[93]

At first glance, the basis for Ephrem's claim remains unclear: How could three hours of darkness and three hours of light constitute a day? An important key

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91   Rouwhorst, *Hymnes pascales*, Vol. 1, 196.

92   ܩܠܘ̈ܒ ܐܟܡ ܠܐ ܡܚܫܒܬܐ ܐܬܠܬ ܡܝܢ ܠܡܫܝܚܐ ܡܠܩܘ (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 64).

93   ܗܘ ܐܝܢܐ ܕܡܢܗܪ \ ܘܡܚܫܟ ܡܢܐ ܠܥܠܬܐ ܠܝܘܪܟܐ ܘܙܒܢܐ ܕܟܕ ܐܚܫܟ ܐܝܟ ܐܝܡܡܐ ܗܘܐ (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 64).

can be found in stanza 3, where Ephrem compares the "glorious symbol" (*rāzâ mšabḥâ*) of Joshua and the sun standing still with the events of the crucifixion.

> [*Cruc.* 6.3] That too was a glorious symbol, which Joshua prepared for
>   the Lord of his name.
> See how [the day] was divided and joined together: it was one and two.
> By dawning and darkening, it was one day;
> by the measure of the year, it was two days:
> the doubling is simple. And preparation day was
> one day by means of measurement, and two by the division of its shin-
>   ing.[94]

The biblical precedent of Joshua (who shares the name of Jesus in Syriac) gives Ephrem an opportunity to set up a resolution to the problem of the Passion chronology.[95] With regard to the actual amount of time that elapsed, Joshua's lengthened "day" was actually two days. But by the measure of sunrise and sunset as markers for the beginning and ending of a day, it was only one day. The miracle produced a day that spanned two calendar days, but remained a single day in the sense that the sun did not set. Ephrem applies the same principle to "preparation day"—the Friday of Jesus' crucifixion. In a reversal of the situation with Joshua, that Friday counted as one day according to the normal calendar measure, but two days because of the sun's movements. The three hours of darkness (followed by three hours of light) that occurred on that Friday actually constituted an additional night and day. This extra day and night allow the reader of the narrative to see three days and three nights (Friday, the added day, and Saturday) before the resurrection.

Thus Ephrem establishes that the rising and setting of the sun form an acceptable basis for marking a day, regardless of how long that day is "by measurement" (*b-gaw kaylâ*). How could such a claim make sense? We must recall that in antiquity, "the day consists of twelve hours" (*yawmâ tartʿesrê šāʿîn hāwê*) as Ephrem says explicitly in the *Second Discourse to Hypatius*.[96] In fact, because

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94   ܐܦ ܗܘ ܗܢ ܐܪܙ ܡܫܒܚܐ ܕܛܝܒ ܝܫܘܥ ܠܡܪܐ ܕܫܡܗ ܐܡ ܐ | ܗܘ ܐܬܦܠܓ ܘܐܬܩܦ ܕܚ ܘܬܪܝܢ
       ܘܬܡ | ܒܕܢܚܐ ܘܒܚܫܟܐ ܚܕ ܗܘ ܝܘܡ ܒܝܕ ܟܝܠܐ ܕܫܢܬ ܬܪܝܢ ܐܢܘܢ | ܗܘ ܟܦܠܐ
       ܦܫܝܩ ܘܥܪܘܒܬ ܚܕ ܗܘ ܝܘܡ ܒܝܕ ܟܝܠܐ ܘܬܪܝܢ ܒܦܘܠܓ ܕܢܘܗܪܗ, (ed. Beck,
       Paschahymnen, 65).

95   Because of the identical names, Jesus is thus "Lord of [Joshua's] name." Cf. *Nat.* 1.31, *CH* 4.18.

96   He writes: "But if the day consists of twelve hours, and the Sun moves through a course of twelve hours, it is clear that the Sun is the fount of days." (*Hyp. II.*, ed. Mitchell, *PR I*, 23; trans. xxxix).

the "day" began at sunrise and ended at sunset, its length could vary considerably depending upon the season.[97] The notion of a significantly shorter or longer "day" was thus not as foreign to an ancient person as it would be today. Burton Visotzky considers this issue in an essay drawing on the passages from the *Didascalia* and Aphrahat discussed above.[98] The answer to how these texts could justify counting shorter periods as a "day," Visotzky argues, lies in the Babylonian Talmud, in the so-called "partial day" principle.[99] At several points in the Talmud, the rabbis argue that part of a day can in fact be considered as a "day" for the sake of certain ritual requirements. For instance, the rabbis allow a man to shave on the seventh day of mourning—rather than the customary eighth day—if the following day is the Sabbath or a holy day. Assuming Rouwhorst is correct about the *Didascalia* and Aphrahat attempting to promote a particular Paschal liturgical practice, this parallel is quite valuable.

That being said, the shorter "day" in Ephrem's chronology does not seem to be an example of Jewish influence on Syriac Christian sources. Rather, the logic expressed in both the Jewish and Christian sources are rooted in a common ancient understanding of timekeeping. For modern people, a day is 24 hours of equal length, while for ancient people, a day was a variable amount of time beginning with the sunrise and ending with sunset. In other words, the duration of the "day" was entirely subject to the movements of the heavenly bodies. Therefore, the parallels between the Syriac writers and the rabbis are noteworthy, but only insofar as they reveal the general temporal flexibility of antiquity. It is unsurprising that Ephrem closely ties the justification for his three-day chronology to astronomical and calendrical considerations.

In stanza six, Ephrem introduces a discussion of the calendar, attempting to justify his shorter day on the Friday of the crucifixion by turning to another example of temporal flexibility—intercalation.

> [*Cruc.* 6.6] Every four years an entire day is intercalated:
> it is a great symbol, for he revealed beforehand the three hours
> that were prepared in order to darken at his murder.[100]

How could the addition of an extra day every four years qualify as a symbol of the three hours of darkness at the crucifixion? As is typical of his *madrāšê*,

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97   Robert Hannah, *Time in Antiquity*, Sciences of Antiquity (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 74.
98   Burton L. Visotzky, "Three Syriac Cruxes," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 42, no. 2 (1991): 167–175.
99   Visotzky, "Three Syriac Cruxes," 170. See *b. Moʿed Qat.* 17b, 19b, 20b; *b. Pesah.* 4a.
100   ܠܩܢܡ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܒܚܕܒ ܡܘܡܕܐ ܥܠܡܐ ܐܬܘܢ ܐܬܘܙ ܗ ܗܡ ܗܙܡ ܡܡ ܗܡܙ ܗܐܠܗ ܩܡܡ ܐܕܘܚܬܝܐ ܗܡ، ܕܒܣܝܡ ܕܡܠܠܗ (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 65).

Ephrem does not provide every detail. However, he does develop the symbol to the point that we may unpack the basic logic of the symbolism. In the reference to the calendar in *Cruc.* 6.6, Ephrem mentions the practice of intercalation (*etkbeš*), the addition of extra time to the calendar for the purposes of keeping it on track, known in modern times through the quadrennial addition of the "leap year" date of February 29. While both the lunar and solar calendars require intercalation, Ephrem is here describing the regular intercalation of the solar calendar.[101] Ephrem's solar calendar would have been a local version of the Roman Julian calendar, known to scholars as the Syro-Antiochene calendar.[102] Like the modern solar calendar, Ephrem's solar year was made up of 365 ¼ days. The insertion of an intercalary day every four years to account for that extra ¼ of a day could also be imagined in annual terms as the yearly addition of ¼ of a day (or 3 hours).[103]

According to Ephrem, this annual addition of three hours is not a corrective measure for a defective calendar. Indeed, he rebuts unnamed "learned ones" who apparently claimed that the excess hours in the solar year somehow made up for the waning of the moon (st. 8).[104] Rather, he repeatedly contends that the three extra hours were present in the calendar from the beginning of creation, in order to attest to the three hours of darkness on the Friday of the crucifixion. He also argues that his hearers should not imagine that there were "six" extra hours in the year of the crucifixion (st. 11). Although he does not develop this point further, he seems to say that in the year of the crucifixion the hours of darkness were the extra hours to which the annual intercalary hours were designed to point. Since these extra three hours are present in the calendar each year, they thus serve, in Ephrem's thinking, as a perpetual reminder of the crucifixion.

The symbolic witness of these additional hours functions on several levels. Ephrem notes that the three extra hours in the year are not visible to the eye, but can only be perceived by the intellect through the use of a device such as a "water clock" (st. 10).[105] A variety of these devices (known in Greek as the κλεψύδρα) were in use in antiquity. These mechanisms measured time by controlling a steady flow of water either in or out of a large basin. A water clock

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101   See stanzas 9 and 15.

102   See Stern, *Calendars in Antiquity*, 255–257.

103   Cf. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 70.13.1–4.

104   The argument of the experts Ephrem is rebutting is unclear to me—perhaps this is a reference to the use of intercalation to align the lunar and solar calendars with one another.

105   The Syriac literally reads "staircase of water" (ܣܘܡܐ ܕܡܝܐ) (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 66). For more on these devices, see Hannah, *Time in Antiquity*, 100–115.

of sufficient size could measure out the twelve hours of the day, showing the passage of time through hour markers inscribed within the device. Ephrem was obviously familiar with water clocks, noting here their ability to make visible hours which otherwise exist only conceptually in the human mind. Ephrem returns in the same stanza (10) to the three hours of darkness at the crucifixion, which were likewise hidden to the eye, being shrouded in darkness. "The symbol," he writes, "is like / the reality, both being hidden."[106] Indeed, both the sun hidden by darkness and the added hours attest to a further level of symbolism to which Ephrem alludes in stanza 9: the hiddenness of God made known in revealed things.

In the course of the poem, Ephrem returns to astronomical and calendrical considerations, arguing that the moon also bears witness to the extra "day" on the Friday of the crucifixion:

> [*Cruc.* 6.12] O glorious Jesus, whom even the moon, behold, proclaims,
> because half a day in an entire month has lost its measure.
> And how much greater is the full measure
> of the hours of the year; thus they have lost their measure of months.
> The cross which he rode was the yoke of his chariot,
> and to it he harnessed the sun and the moon.[107]

The final piece of imagery in this quotation, of Christ riding a cross chariot pulled by the heavenly bodies, is quite striking. It both draws upon and challenges the popular ancient Mediterranean image of the solar quadriga driven by the sun god (Sol, Helios). Unlike the depictions well known in mythology and art of the time, it is Christ who drives the heavenly chariot (which is the cross), and the sun and moon are merely his beasts of burden. The deeper sense of this is that the solar and lunar calendars are yoked in some way to the moment of the crucifixion. This, I would argue, is the overall message Ephrem seeks to convey in *Cruc.* 6.

To interpret Ephrem's statements in this stanza requires a more thorough understanding of the lunar (or lunisolar) calendar. The Babylonian-derived lunar calendar was in wide use throughout the eastern Mediterranean until the

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106   ܘܗܘܐ ܪܐܙܐ ܕܕܡܐ ܗܘ ܠܪܐ ܐܪܙ ܘܗ ܐܪܙ ܐ\ ܐܣܟܝܬܐ\ ܡܣܝ ܕܟ ܟܣܝ ܐܬܘܗܝܣ (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 66).
107   ܐܘ ܠܟ ܣܓܝ ܕܟܣܝܐ ܕܐܦ ܗܘ ܐܝܪܚܐ ܗܐ ܡܘܪܚ ܠܟ \ܕܬܠܓܗ ܡܘܗܐ ܟܠܗ ܐܝܪܚ \ ܣܡܝ ܚܠܡܗ \ ܘܕܟܡܐ ܕܡܬܝܪ ܗܝ ܡܠܐ ܡܘܗܐ \ ܕܬܩܢ ܐܢܘܢ ܘܠܟ ܣܡܝ ܚܠܡܘܢ ܕܝܪܚܐ \ ܙܩܝܦܐ ܕܪܟܒ ܗܘ ܐ ܗܘܐ ܢܝܪ ܐܘ ܪܟܘܒܗ \ ܘܒܗ ܐܪܬܟ ܫܡܫܐ ܘܣܗܪܐ (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 67).

spread of the solar Julian calendar.[108] This calendar, to which Ephrem attests in the *Second Discourse to Hypatius*, consisted of 12 months, each with 29 ½ days—thus his statement "a half day in an entire month has lost its measure." In total, the lunar calendar was made up of 354 days. Due to this discrepancy between the lunar and solar calendars, the lunar calendar will "drift" significantly if it is not regularly intercalated.[109] In stanza 17, Ephrem elaborates further on this "deficiency" of the lunar calendar:

> [*Cruc.* 6.17] For behold: eleven days are lacking from its year,
> From the 365 days,
> the reckoning of the full solar year.[110]

The lunar calendar's missing half-day and loss of eleven days provides Ephrem with further opportunities to develop the symbolic testimony of the calendars. He writes that just as the sun bears witness to the Son through its three extra hours, so the moon also attests through its six hours (or half a day, which if we recall, is how much time each lunar month "loses" by only consisting of 29.5 days).[111] In the course of the poem, the missing hours of the moon and surplus hours of the sun provide fertile ground for further theological interpretation. Ephrem imagines the sun's excess hours and the moon's missing hours as symbols of Jesus' divinity and humanity (in stanza 14); and of the blessing, and subsequent diminishment of the Jewish People (in stanza 16).

Ephrem's final remarks on the calendar turn to Moses as an example:

> [*Cruc.* 6.18] Moses mixed and mingled the reckoning of the year and the
>   calculation of the moon.
> He ordered, constructed, and fixed the number of the year.
> The year of the house of Noah [had] two reckonings.
> Of both luminaries, the skillful scribe[112]
> Made one reckoning. Our Lord, may I become a scribe of secrets for you.
> Translate parables through your servant![113]

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108 Stern, *Calendars in Antiquity*, 72.

109 Hannah, *Time in Antiquity*, 18–21.

110 ܪܘܚܫܬܐ ܫܚܡܩܐ ܗܐ ܚܝܢ ܗܝ ܚܒ ܐܘܬ ܐ \ ܗܝ ܗܘܬܐܐܘܠܝܐ ܪܐܘܐ ܘܚܕܝ ܘܚܡܫܐ
     ܪܚܬܐ ܘܢܒܐܐ (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 67). Cf. Ephrem, *Comm. Gen.* 1.25.3.

111 See stanza 13.

112 I.e., Moses.

113 ܡܘܫܐ ܚܠܛ ܘܡܘܠܚܡ ܠܚܠܡ ܫܢܬܐ ܘܣܘܟܚ ܣܗܪܐ \ ܛܟܣ ܘܒܢ ܘܩܒܥ ܚܠܡ ܫܢܬܐ
     ܫܢܬܐ \ ܐܘܬ ܒܝܬ ܢܘܚ ܗܘ ܚܠܡ ܬܠܝܢ \ ܪܗܪܬܝ ܢܗܘܪܐ ܚܟܝܡ ܣ ܚܠܡ \ ܣܦܪܐ ܚܡܦܐ

Ephrem's references here are somewhat obscure, but comprehensible. A parallel passage appears in the *Second Discourse to Hypatius*, where Ephrem similarly offers Moses as an example for demonstrating the true purpose of the sun and moon. In that text too, he explains that God has arranged both the sun and moon as markers for time.[114] He then argues that although God has ordained the sun to count days and the moon to mark months, the inaccuracy of both the solar and lunar calendars (reflected in their need for intercalation) shows their insufficiency as objects of worship. The oblique references to Moses in both passages probably refer to Genesis 1:14, of which Moses was the presumed author.[115] There, "Moses" describes the sun and the moon as timekeepers ("for signs," "seasons," "days," and "years"). The reference to the "house of Noah" is also unclear, but probably refers to the muddled chronology of Genesis 8, in which two different dates are given for when the earth became dry in the aftermath of the flood.[116] Moses was also the supposed author of this passage. Regardless of Ephrem's specific allusions, however, it is clear that he believes that Moses' testimony in Genesis provides a model to demonstrate the importance of the sun and the moon to mark the passage of time. As the final lines of this stanza demonstrate, the examples of the creation account and the flood narrative are "parables" (*pellêtâ*) which Ephrem as the "scribe" (*sāprâ*) seeks to make sense of through divine insight. They are witnesses to the broader theme of the poem, that the time of the Passion and its symbolic markers in the calendar were preordained from the creation of the world.

Let us now briefly summarize Ephrem's answer to the three-day problem as given in *Cruc.* 6. The first day lasted from sunrise on Friday morning until noon. Then, for three hours, from noon until the ninth hour, there was a period of "night." This "night of the daytime" was followed by three hours of light. At this point, then, two days and one night had elapsed. The second night was Friday night (the night of the Sabbath), and it was succeeded by the Sabbath

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ܡܢܝ݂ ܐܘܟܡܐ ܠܝ ܡܣܟ ܣܗܕܐ ܕܣܗܕܘܬܐ \ ܘܗܝܡ ܐܠܝ݂ ܟܡ ܣܟ ܒܪܗ ܒܥܢ ܡܢ ܠܒܝܬ (ed. Beck, *Paschahymnen*, 68).

114   *PR* I, 21–23.

115   *Comm. Gen.* I.23.2: "That [God] said: 'Let them be for signs,' [refers to] measures of time, and 'let them be for seasons,' clearly indicates summer and winter. 'Let them be for days,' are measured by the rising and setting of the sun, and 'let them be for years,' are comprised of the daily cycles of the sun and the monthly cycles of the moon." (ed. Tonneau, *Commentarii*, 20; trans. Amar and Mathews, *Selected Prose Works*, 90).

116   In *Comm. Gen.* VI.12, Ephrem argues on the basis of the dates given in Genesis 8 that Noah had been in the ark for 365 days. This is evidence for Ephrem that even "the generation of the house of Noah" had used a 365-day calendar, and thus it was clearly not the creation of the Chaldeans or Egyptians. (Tonneau, *Commentarii*, 61).

day (the third day). By the evening after the Sabbath, three days and two nights elapsed, so the final night was completed in the first six hours of the night, after which—at midnight—Ephrem surmises that Jesus rose from the dead (st. 19).[117] Ephrem's preoccupation with the solar and lunar calendars reflects the underlying assumptions of this odd chronology of the Passion week—that "day" and "night" are subject more to the movements of the heavenly bodies than to fixed lengths of time.[118]

5.3   Cruc. *6: Conclusions*

Ephrem shared much of this chronology with other Syriac Christian writers. Nevertheless, *Cruc.* 6 differs in many ways both from Aphrahat's *Demonstration* and the 21st chapter of the Syriac *Didascalia*. Unlike the other Syriac witnesses to the "three-day problem," *Cruc.* 6 moves beyond simply offering a chronology of the Passion narrative that fits the "sign of Jonah" saying of Matt 12:40. Ephrem uniquely fleshes out the symbolic meaning of that additional "day" that took place on the Friday with relation to the calendar. This preoccupation reflects Ephrem's interest throughout his writings in demonstrating the fundamental agreement between scripture and nature: the two speak with one voice. In this case, both speak to the centrality of the crucifixion of Jesus. At that moment, the heavenly bodies themselves bore witness to their Lord, to such a degree that the measuring of time itself points to the event.

Cruc. 6 also diverges significantly from other *madrāšê* of Ephrem that I have considered in this chapter and throughout this book. Unlike most of Ephrem's *madrāšê*, here the poet directly engages with sciences of his time—discussing the details of the calendar and showing knowledge of techniques of time-keeping (like the use of water clocks). We also find a number of parallels between this *madrāšâ* and Ephrem's prose works, particularly the critiques of Manichaean cosmology in the *Second Discourse to Hypatius* and the interpretation of the creation of the sun and moon in the *Commentary on Genesis*. The level of sophistication in the development of the symbolism in this poem is also quite notable. The Syriac vocabulary is challenging, and a modern reader requires a considerable amount of background study simply to understand Ephrem's reasoning. This complexity begs the question: in what context might a *madrāšâ* like this one have been performed?

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117   "But perhaps on the sixth hour of that blessed night / Our Lord and our God was raised." Rouwhorst (*Hymnes pascales*, vol. 1, 196) believes this conjecture has a liturgical background, arising from the celebration of the resurrection on the midnight between the Saturday and Sunday of Pascha in Ephrem's church.

118   Hartung et al., trans., *Songs for the Fast and Pascha*, 32.

Indeed, though we might typically assume a public liturgical setting, a poem such as this seems more suited to the schoolroom than the bema, especially given the close parallels in subject matter with the sophisticated *Discourses to Hypatius* and the *Commentary on Genesis*. Ephrem's language seems to provide some hints. Consider, for instance, Ephrem's self-identification throughout many of his *madrāšê*. He often calls himself a lyre, and frequently characterizes his poetic actions as singing or playing.[119] In this poem, however, Ephrem refers to himself as a "scribe of secrets" (*sāpar stîrātâ*) (st. 18) and asks God to help him "write" (*ktab*) (st. 17) and "translate" (*targem*) (st. 18). This language evokes a more "scholarly" setting than we would typically imagine for Ephrem's *madrāšê*.

While the ancient biographical traditions' portrayals of Ephrem as a hymn-writer and liturgical song leader have seen increased attention in recent scholarship (with the growing interest in performance and audiences), we should not forget another common ancient image of Ephrem—as a teacher. *Cruc.* 6 challenges our imagined dichotomy between the two categories (teaching and hymn-writing). Here, we find Ephrem resolving an exegetical difficulty (the three-day problem), with the support of his knowledge of astronomy and the calendar, and finding great symbols which God has embedded into the created universe. Wickes's proposal that some of Ephrem's *madrāšê* were performed in small ascetic literary circles rather than public liturgies seems a good fit for the evidence of this poem.[120] Such study circles would likely have been familiar with chronological speculations about the dates and times of biblical events, and would have perhaps been interested in hearing more about how a chronology of the Passion well-known among learned Christians in the region of Syria and Mesopotamia could be supported by the calendar and foretold in sacred texts. Finally, the inclusion of this *madrāšâ* in a collection presumed to be liturgically-oriented (*On the Crucifixion*) raises questions about the creation and use of the *madrāšê* cycles.[121] Were all the poems assembled in the cycle *On the Crucifixion* composed for liturgical performance, as scholars have generally assumed? It seems unlikely, on the evidence of *Cruc.* 6.

In addition to complicating our picture of the performance and collection of Ephrem's *madrāšê*, this poem attests to Ephrem's concern with constructing universal chronologies within which to situate the pivotal moments of creation and redemption. As in previous sections, here we have seen Ephrem draw upon existing traditions (in this case, a common Syriac response to the "three

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119   For Ephrem's self-identification as a "lyre," see Palmer, "Lyre Without a Voice".

120   Wickes, "Between Liturgy and School," 45–46.

121   See Hartung, "Authorship and Dating," 310–311.

day problem") and weave them into a broader setting. In Ephrem's telling, the heavenly bodies and the measurement of time itself bear witness to the time of Jesus' crucifixion.

6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shed light on the many ways in which Ephrem imagined the temporal setting and chronology of the Passion and death of Jesus in his *madrāšê*. Although the festival of Pascha was very likely the primary setting for these reflections, details about the structure and timing of the festival (which was likely undergoing major changes in Ephrem's lifetime) were not at the forefront of his concerns. Ephrem focused on demonstrating how creation, scripture, and the calendar attest to the month, day, and even hour of the death of Jesus. Over the course of the chapter, I also considered how the topic of time informs our understanding of the context of Ephrem's theological imagination. I presented evidence of Ephrem's connections with Christian traditions of chronographic speculation, his knowledge of astronomy and time-keeping, his use of Hellenistic traditions of poetic imagery, and his application of long-standing practices of personifying months and seasons.

In Ephrem's hands, the month of April became the consistent chronological point with which he could connect the Exodus, the Passion and death of Jesus, and the Christian festival of Pascha. He crafted a cosmic chronology, in which other events in biblical history point to the Passion and death of Jesus. His interpretation of the exegetical problem in *Cruc.* 6 thus provides not simply an opportunity to offer a chronological solution for the Passion narrative, but a chance to elaborate the symbolic significance of both scripture and nature.

Conclusion

Throughout this book, I have shown that, although he was far from systematic in his portrayal of Jesus' suffering and death, Ephrem drew upon and developed earlier traditions to depict those events in a dramatic and creative fashion. He did not have a single "atonement theology" or "theology of the death of Jesus." Rather, on a topic like the Passion and death of Jesus, Ephrem's theological imagination could range widely as sought to make sense of the significance of that central event in the gospel story for his audiences. Further, because Ephrem wrote in a variety of literary genres, for distinct audiences and occasions, the metrical format, occasional nature, and publicly performed quality of most of his works shaped how he portrayed the death of Jesus.

Ephrem's approach was thus quite distant from any modern scholarly attempts to reconstruct early Christian "doctrines" of the death of Christ. Ephrem did not assume the later Christian idea that the death of Jesus was the "atonement," or that divine–human reconciliation was limited in some way to that event. Rather, he imagined a wide range of "atoning" actions beyond the crucifixion, and viewed the effects of Jesus' death as encompassing everything from the keeping of time to the fate of the Jews to the payment of human debt.

1 Summary of This Work

Following the introduction, the second chapter of this book demonstrated the centrality of the raising of the dead at Jesus' death (Matt 27:52–53) to Ephrem's theological imagination. Situating Ephrem as a reader of the Bible within the context of Syriac Christian culture in fourth-century northern Mesopotamia, I introduced his allusive and generative manner of reading biblical sources. I then argued that Ephrem's particular emphasis on Matt 27:52–53 has its roots in the unique variant form of the passage found in Ephrem's Syriac gospel text, as well as an eschatological discourse of Jesus from John 5 and the unique vocabulary of salvation in the Syriac translations of the New Testament. Especially in his *madrāšê*, Ephrem portrayed the raising of the "dead" at the moment of the death of Jesus as an event of universal significance, one that illustrated Jesus' power as the creator to give salvific "life." Ephrem repeatedly alluded to this scene, weaving it into new theological contexts. By contrast, in a prose polemical discourse targeting the followers of Bardaisan, Ephrem strangely made no

mention of this passage (so central to his thinking) to support the eschatological resurrection of the body, as we would expect in this context. If, however, we understand the passage's role for Ephrem—not as a proof text for the resurrection, but as an instantiation of Christ's power to give life and defeat death—we can make sense of the absence of Matt 27:52–53 from this polemic.

In the third chapter I investigated Ephrem's adaptation of preexisting traditions concerning Jesus' struggle against Death and his descent to the underworld. In the *Mêmrâ on Our Lord*, Ephrem cast Death in an unspeaking bestial role, as a monster lured into consuming Jesus, only to be forced to vomit him up and the other dead with him. By highlighting the role of "Death" as the enemy overcome by Jesus, Ephrem shows continuities with very early Christian traditions of Christ's descent to the dead. His account reveals important similarities to and differences from the "fishhook" or divine deception motif that was becoming popular in Greek-speaking Christianity in the fourth century. The latter half of the chapter examined Ephrem's transformation of Death into a fully personified character in his dramatic dialogue poems recounting Jesus' descent to Sheol (*Nis.* 36–42). In these texts, which are the earliest surviving Christian texts to personify Death (and Satan) in such detail, Ephrem used the perspective of these characters to reflect on the significance of Jesus' descent to Sheol. As I further explored Ephrem's characterization of Death in the context of late antique rhetoric and literature, I argued that Ephrem's portrayal of this figure was both nuanced and ambiguous; he did not portray the character of Death and the event of the descent to Sheol in a consistent manner.

In the fourth chapter, I sought to analyze Ephrem's portrayal of the Jewish role in the Passion and death of Jesus, in all its disturbing complexity. I focused especially on understanding the distinct literary and theological functions of Jews in Ephrem's retellings of moments in the Passion narrative, emphasizing that Ephrem cast the Jews in many distinct dramatic roles as he reimagined the gospel story. Ephrem consistently imagined all the villains of the passion narratives as Jews and the "good" characters as Gentiles. He likewise delighted in emphasizing the negative consequence of what he portrayed as Jewish attempts to shame Jesus through the events of the Passion. Yet behind some of his retellings we find a multivalent polemic targeted toward "heretical" Christians or the Jews of Ephrem's own day. Ephrem even sometimes wrote in less accusatory ways or even avoided anti-Jewish polemic altogether when it might be expected. These diverse portrayals beg the question about the "real" Ephrem's view of Jews, a question that is ultimately unanswerable. Nevertheless, we cannot avoid the centrality of anti-Judaism in Ephrem's reimagining of the Passion narrative—a supersessionist logic underlay even his most positive portrayals of Jews.

The fifth chapter explored Ephrem's use of economic imagery to imagine the meaning of the Passion and death of Jesus. Once more, I demonstrated how Ephrem drew upon traditional Christian language but also developed it in dramatic fashion, especially in his *madrāšê*. Over the course of this analysis of the dynamics of Ephrem's use of economic imagery, I argued that we should understand Ephrem's statements about debt payment and gift-giving in light of the relational economy of patronage and benefaction that was common in fourth-century Syria and Mesopotamia (as in the rest of the world of late antiquity). Across the diverse spectrum of his writings (prose discourses as well as poetic *madrāšê*), Ephrem was quite consistent: he used this imagery extensively, but almost never developed it beyond simple affirmations. Indeed, as last section of this chapter demonstrated, Ephrem's anti-Marcionite polemics reveal his ambivalence regarding certain aspects of debt payment imagery, especially the language of "ransom," which is almost entirely absent from his corpus. Thus, while Ephrem affirmed that Jesus' death paid human debt, he framed that payment as the beneficent action of the divine creator and benefactor.

In the final chapter, I considered the various ways in which Ephrem imagined the timing and chronology of Jesus' Passion and death. While this interest was relevant to the festival of Pascha (which was likely the setting in which most of the *madrāšê* in question were performed), Ephrem was not especially interested in reflecting on the structure and timing of the festival as such. Rather, his focus remained on demonstrating the harmony between scripture, the created order, and the calendar, with all attesting to the moment of Jesus' death. He consistently emphasized the month of April as the point in time linking Jesus' conception, Passion and death, the Exodus narrative, and the celebration of the Christian Paschal feast. The second half of the chapter accentuated this point by analyzing a *madrāšâ* devoted to reconciling the chronology of the Passion narrative. Rather than simply stating its resolution to an exegetical problem about the chronology of Jesus' death, Ephrem's poem drew from the evidence of the solar and lunar calendars to create a cosmic harmony in which the heavenly bodies and the measurement of time itself bear witness to the crucifixion and burial of Christ.

2 Possibilities for Further Study

A possible weakness of my study is its singular focus on the works of Ephrem. It potentially perpetuates the "archive problem" which Ellen Muehlberger argues constrains the study of late antiquity. By privileging (named) educated Christian "authors," who represented only a very tiny fraction of the population, we

inevitably skew our understanding of religion in the period.[1] To some degree, this is unavoidable, especially in the disciplines of textual and intellectual history. I have tried to emphasize the variety of voices and audiences among the texts we can confidently attribute to Ephrem, rather than portraying them as a coherent authorial "corpus." Yet the overemphasis on named authors in the discipline can perpetuate the idea that early Christian textual evidence consists of a series of authorial corpora, rather than texts of all sorts. This is especially true with late antique liturgical poems and homilies, of which vast quantities of the surviving sources are pseudonymous or anonymous. Ignoring these texts because they are "inauthentic" or "dubious" adds unnecessary constraints to our understanding of the past, and discourages investigation of large swathes of primary sources. It is my hope that future research in early Syriac literature broadens beyond a focus on named authors like Ephrem to explore a wider range of source material, like the texts pseudonymously attributed to Ephrem in Greek, Syriac, and Armenian.

This monograph also raises several additional possibilities for further study. First, as I have emphasized, Ephrem thought, wrote, and performed on a contested terrain. It has become something of a scholarly tradition to state that Syria and northern Mesopotamia (especially Edessa) was a hothouse of sectarian diversity. Whether or not this characterization is entirely accurate, it should be clear to us that Ephrem's writing consistently sought to respond to this variegated religious landscape through polemic. It would be useful to explore Ephrem's rhetorical strategies in engaging his thelogical opponents in a comprehensive manner (as Robert Morehouse does, to a more limited degree, in his study of the *Hymns against Heresies*).[2] What do Ephrem's attacks reveal about the place of his community in the religious terrain of Northern Mesopotamia? What were the audiences for Ephrem's polemic? How, if at all, can we distinguish Ephrem's slanders from pieces of reliable evidence regarding the beliefs and practices about otherwise little known Christian groups like the Marcionites?

An additional possibility for exploration of the context of Ephrem's thought would be to bring his works into further dialogue with non-Christian sources

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1 Ellen Muehlberger, "On Authors, Fathers, and Holy Men," *Marginalia: Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 20, 2015, https://themarginaliareview.com/on-authors-fathers-and-holy -men-by-ellen-muehlberger/. See also my discussion of this issue in Blake Hartung, "The Collection and Transmission of Late Antique Liturgical Poetry: A Comparative Approach," *JECS* 29, no. 3 (2021): 415–444, 442–443.

2 See Robert J. Morehouse, "Bar Daysan and Mani in Ephraem the Syrian's Heresiography" (PhD Dissertation, Washington, D.C., 2013).

(Jewish, Samaritan, Manichaean, and Mandaean) originating from a similar Aramaic-speaking milieu in late antiquity. The challenge with this, of course, lies in moving beyond suggestive parallels in language and imagery and toward a thoroughgoing reassessment of the subject matter in light of reading these sources in conversation with one another.

Throughout this book, I have sought first and foremost to present a comprehensive account of Ephrem, one that views his individual writings as distinct literary productions, with their own contexts and audiences. Engaging with these features has proven essential to understanding Ephrem's theological perspective on an subject like the death Jesus. Although we possess only a fragmentary picture of Ephrem's life, and, indeed, of the Christian communities of fourth-century Mesopotamia, I have endeavored, as much as possible, to situate Ephrem's literary composition within the broader setting of Greco-Syriac culture and late antique Christianity. I have shown, for instance, how Ephrem drew on the Syriac gospel and Syriac traditions in centering the raising of the dead at Jesus' death (Matt 27:52–53). I examined Ephrem's literary construction of characters like Death, Sheol, and the month of April in light of Greco-Roman rhetorical exercises and the Mesopotamian dispute poem tradition. I gave evidence of Ephrem's knowledge of astronomy and time-keeping, and his connections with earlier Christian traditions of chronographic speculation.

In all of these instances and more, this study recognized Ephrem's habit of creatively appropriating and reusing older traditions to retell the events of Jesus' death. He did so in ways that highlighted the most dramatic moments of the biblical narratives and spoke to the particular interests and themes he sought to accentuate in his own compositions. By exploring these dynamics of Ephrem's theological imagination, we have gained new insights, not only into Ephrem and the early Syriac Christian tradition, but into early Christian reflection on the suffering and death of Jesus in the formative period of the fourth century.

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In this volume, Blake Hartung explores the place of the passion and death of Jesus in the writings of Ephrem of Nisibis (ca. 307–373). The book argues that the genre of Ephrem's works (usually short poems for public performance), is key to understanding his unsystematic approach. Ephrem drew widely upon the Passion narratives and traditional motifs related to Christ's death and deployed them differently in distinct settings. Each chapter explores a key theme in Ephrem's discourse about the death of Christ in context (including anti-Judaism, the defeat of death, and economic imagery). Ultimately, Hartung urges further consideration of the role of Christ's death in early Christian thought and practice beyond the traditional confines of atonement theology.

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